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Issue 54

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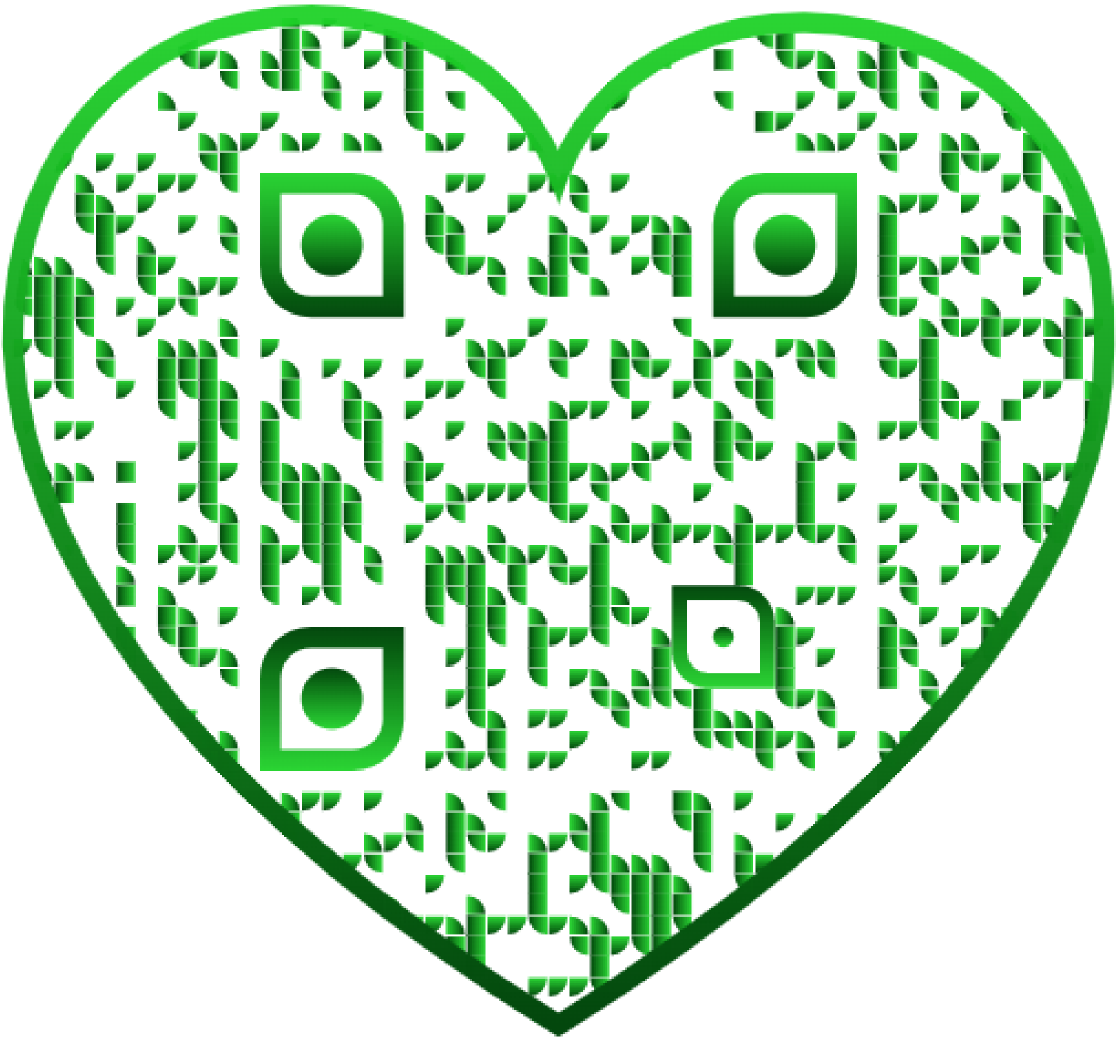
VENICE CARNIVAL AND ITS ICONIC MASKS

THE TRUTH ABOUT HUMAN SACRIFICE IN ATZEC FESTIVALS

THE LEGENDS BEHIND INDIA'S COLORFUL HOLI

FESTIVALS AND CELEBRATIONS OF THE ANCIENT WORLD

plus The Vesuvius Challenge and the Race to Read the Scrolls



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The Fascinating History of the Venice Carnival and its Masks

Happy Holi: Ancient Legends Behind India's Colorful Celebration

Human Sacrifice in Ancient Aztec Festivals and Celebrations. Separating Fact from Fiction

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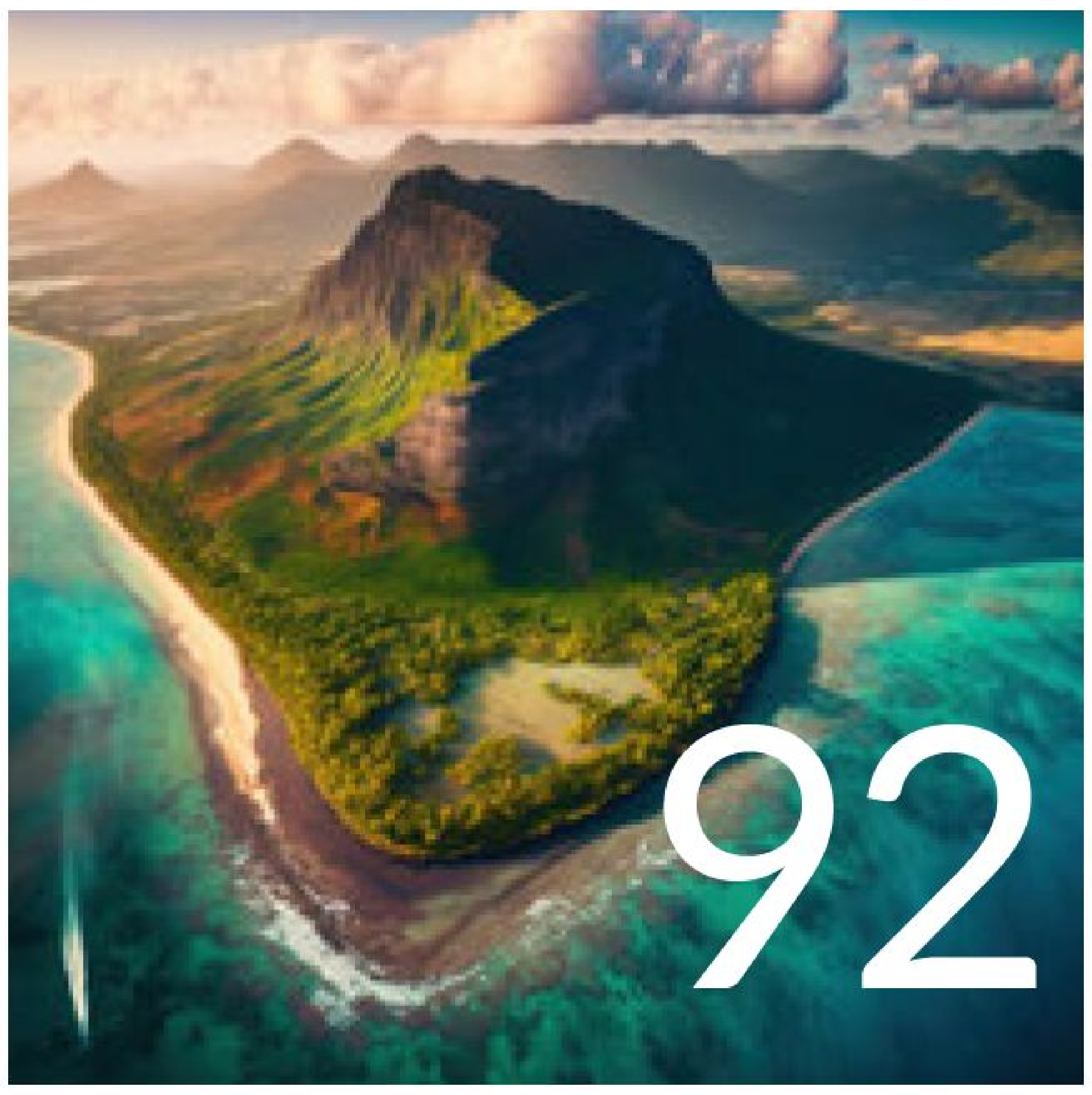

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CECILIA BOGAARD

Chief Editor, Ancient Origins Magazine

With the world in such flux, *Ancient Origins Magazine* is embracing the Chinese New Year of the Snake, a symbol of transformation and renewal. For 2025, we aim to welcome fresh insights that accompany change and growth, while looking to the past for solace and wisdom.

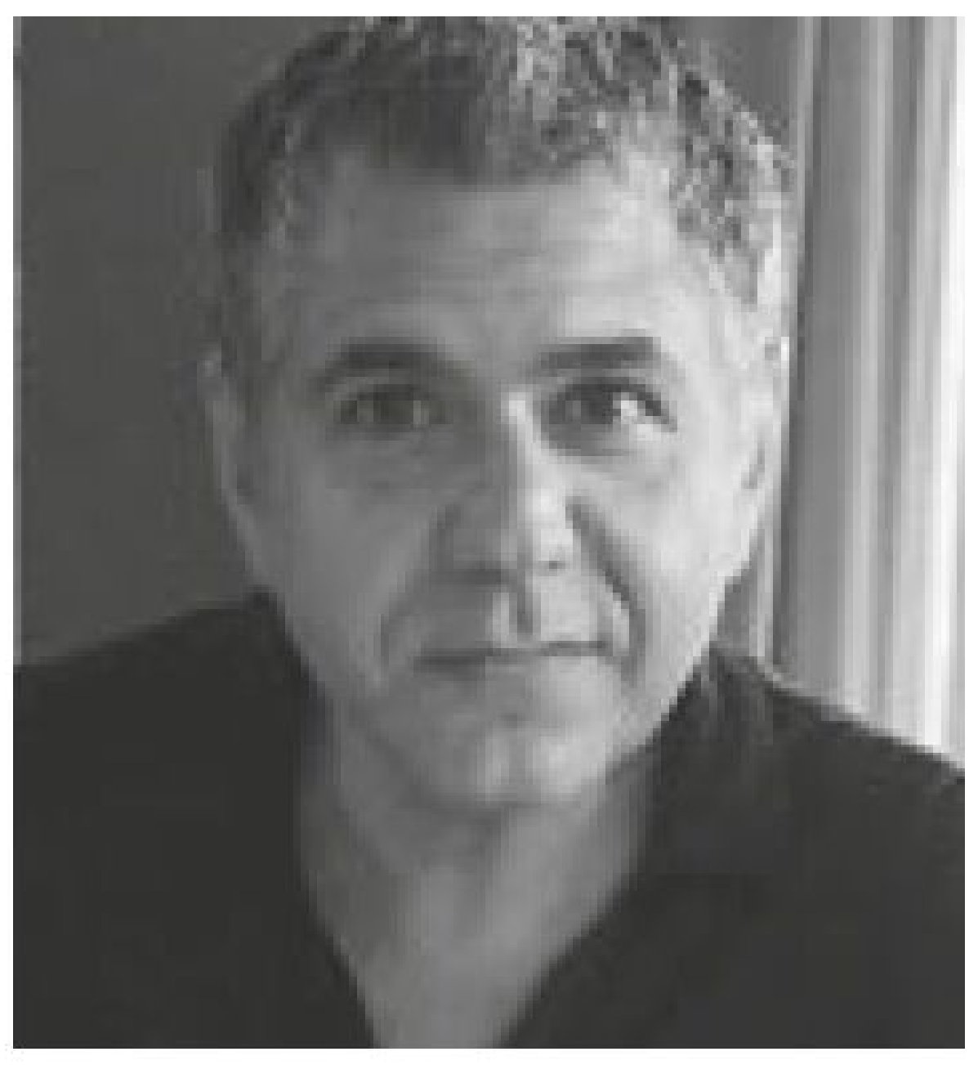
For our 54th issue, we explore festivals and celebrations, rediscovering the origins of those we know and love—and revealing the fascinating stories behind others that may be less familiar. By tracing their ancient roots, we illuminate the universal human desire to honor the passage of time and find meaning through celebration.

While January 1 begins the year for some, cultures worldwide mark new beginnings in strikingly diverse ways. From Egypt's ancient *Wepet Renpet* and the celestial Māori *Matariki* to Brazil's vibrant *Réveillon* and Spain's midnight grape-guzzling traditions, these customs reveal a universal human longing for rebirth.

We delve into the origins of Venice's famed carnival and its iconic masks, explore the colorful traditions of India's Holi, uncover the significance of Egypt's Heb-Sed Festival, and separate fact from fiction regarding the role of human sacrifice in Aztec rituals. Additionally, we examine how legends of Count Dracula and Vlad the Impaler have shaped festivals and tourism in Romania, highlighting the discomfort of building a narrative around the macabre.

This issue reflects on how the haunting beauty of Le Morne Brabant in Mauritius has come to symbolize hope and resistance, delving into its connection to the grim history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. We also had the profound privilege of connecting with chef Fadi Kattan in Bethlehem, who shared how Palestinian cuisine—like his recipe for *makloubeh*—celebrates solidarity, hospitality, and resilience in the face of ongoing oppression.

Cícero Moraes transports us back in time, bringing us face-to-face with Saint Nicholas, his storied history, and how he morphed into our modern-day Santa. Finally, we spoke with Stephen Parsons, project lead of the Vesuvius Challenge, which uses citizen science, advanced technology, and AI to unlock knowledge preserved in carbonized papyri from Mount Vesuvius's catastrophic eruption.



MASSIMO BONASORTE

Journalist, Ancient Origins Magazine

It's time to embark on a new challenge, and the first magazine of 2025 is born under the sign of the Snake, which, in Chinese culture, symbolizes transformation and change—essential for attracting new, positive energies.

With great pleasure, I have accepted Ioannis's proposal to take on the direction of this magazine, continuing the beautiful and insightful work done by Cecilia. From the next issue onward, she will focus more on research and discovery, bringing you new topics and exclusive interviews. This deliberate choice aims to spark curiosity in all those who, like us, are passionate about the past and have been captivated by this extraordinary publication for years.

Who am I? A journalist and researcher who has never strayed from his first love—Mesopotamia... archaeology, history...

However, the changes extend beyond editorial direction. The magazine's design will now be in the hands of our new art director, Rose-Marie Ernetorp, whose expertise will infuse the pages of Ancient Origins with the emotional depth and elegance characteristic of Scandinavian design.

With journalism, passion, and scientific rigor as our guiding principles, we are ready to embrace the challenges ahead—together with you, our readers. Stay tuned... a new journey is about to begin.

Enjoy the read!

Spotlight: Festivals and Celebrations in the Ancient World

EXPERTS IN THIS ISSUE...

Fadi Kattan

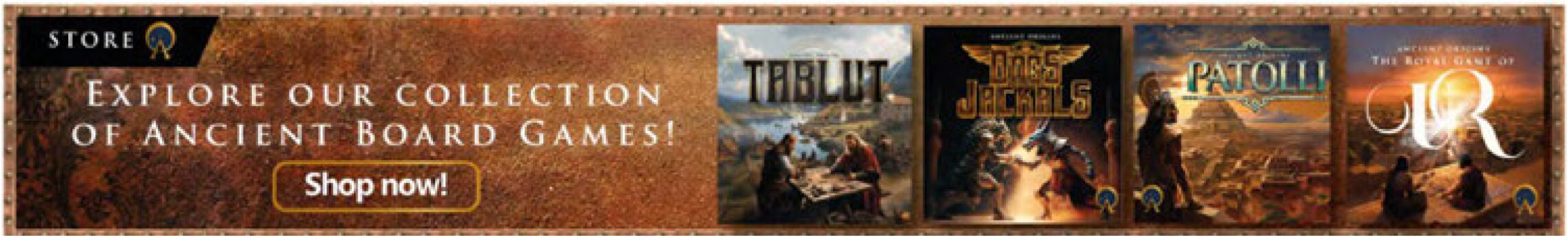
Author of *Bethlehem: A Celebration of Palestinian Food* and known for his London and Toronto restaurants, podcast *Ramblings of a Chef,* and YouTube series *Teta's Kitchen*, Bethlehem-based chef Fadi Kattan celebrates the rich heritage of Palestinian cuisine.

Cícero Moraes

A pioneering expert in modern forensic facial reconstruction, Cícero Moraes utilizes his background in 3D computer graphics. His portfolio includes crime scenes, medical reconstructions, animal prosthetics, as well as religious and historic reconstructions.

Stephen Parsons

Stephen Parsons, Project Lead of the Vesuvius Challenge, spearheads efforts to decode ancient scrolls buried by the eruption Mount Vesuvius. Combining cutting-edge technology with historical inquiry, he leads a groundbreaking initiative to unlock secrets hidden for nearly 2,000 years.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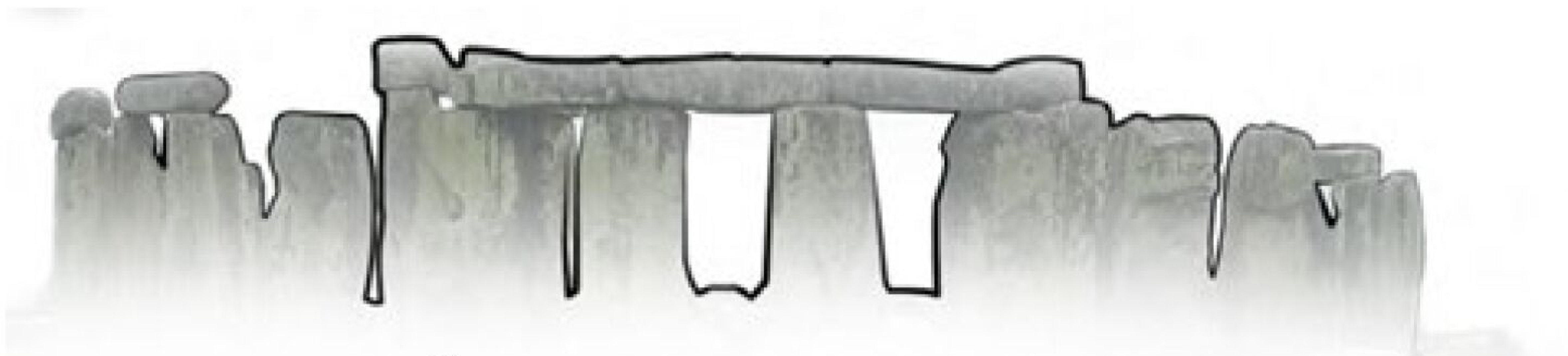


Archaeonews

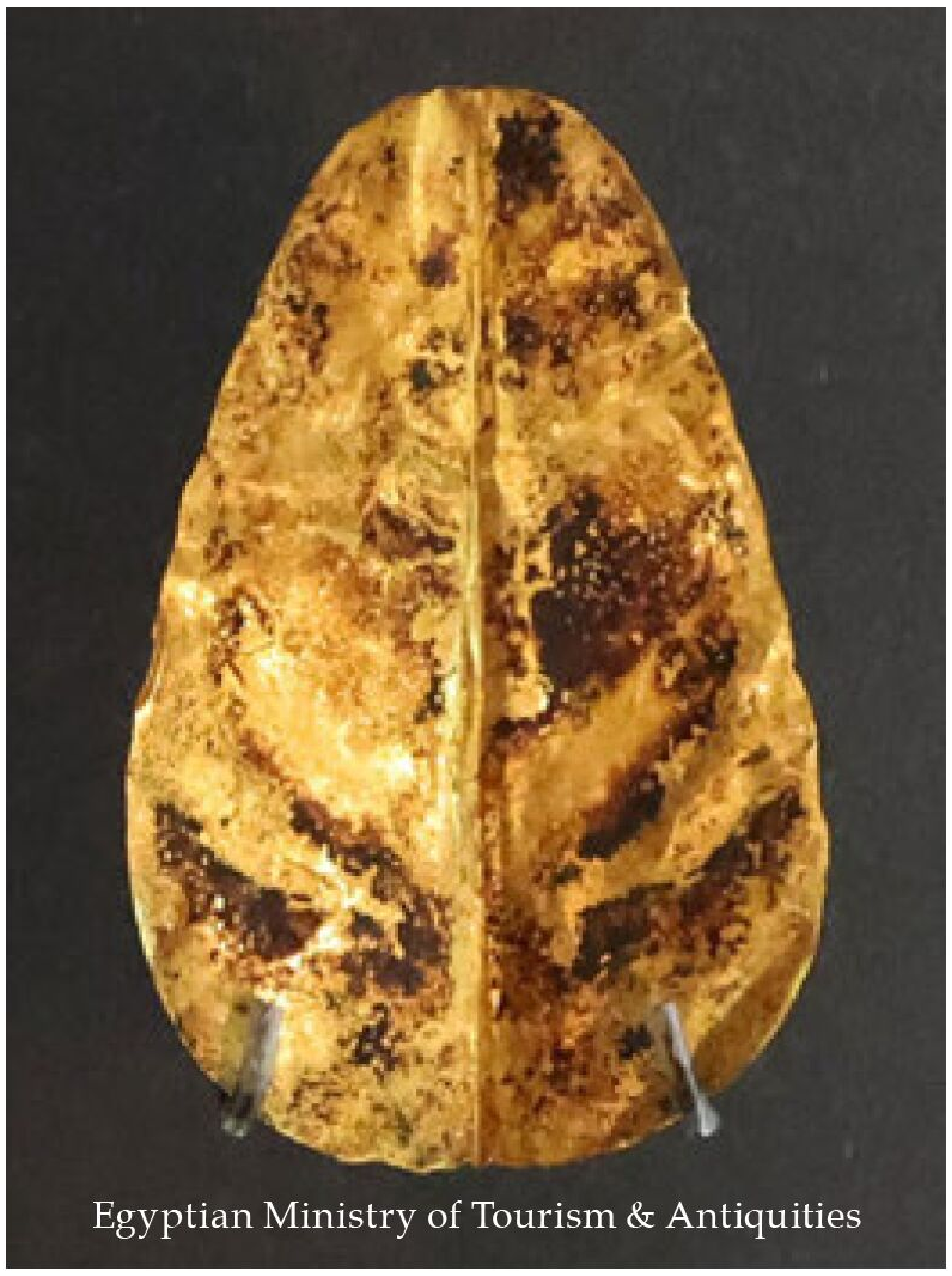
By Jessica Nadeau

ANCIENT EGYPTIAN GOLD-TONGUED MUMMIES FOUND AT OXYRHYNCHUS

Archaeologists in Egypt have uncovered 13 mummies with gold tongues, dating to the Ptolemaic period, around 304 to 30 BC. The mummies were discovered in a burial shaft with three chambers at Oxyrhynchus, an ancient city near the Bahr Yussef canal in what is now Egypt's El Minya Governorate.

The gold tongues, a key part of ancient Egyptian funerary customs, were placed in the mouths of the deceased to enable them to communicate with the gods in the afterlife. Gold, symbolizing divine purity and power, was believed to assist the deceased in their journey to the next world. Earlier, in 2023, a similar discovery was made in which 16 gold tongues were unearthed at the same site.

The mummies are thought to belong to individuals of high status, potentially linked to local temples and animal worship. In addition to the mummies, researchers found 29 amulets shaped like scarabs and deities such as Horus and Isis. The excavation also revealed vivid wall paintings that depict the tomb owner and various gods. These gold-tongued mummies shed light into the religious practices and beliefs of ancient Egyptians, particularly their complex rituals surrounding death and the afterlife.



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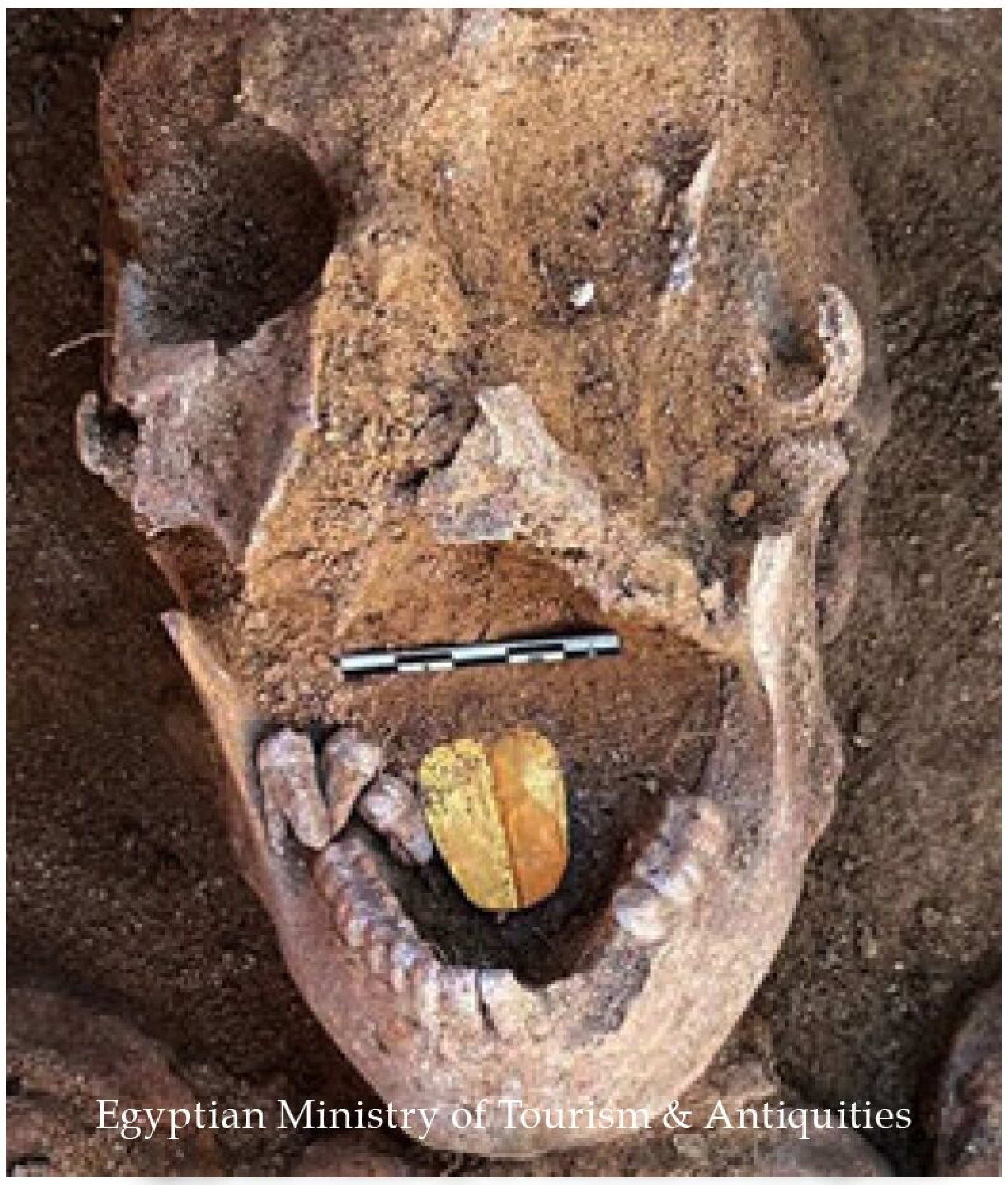

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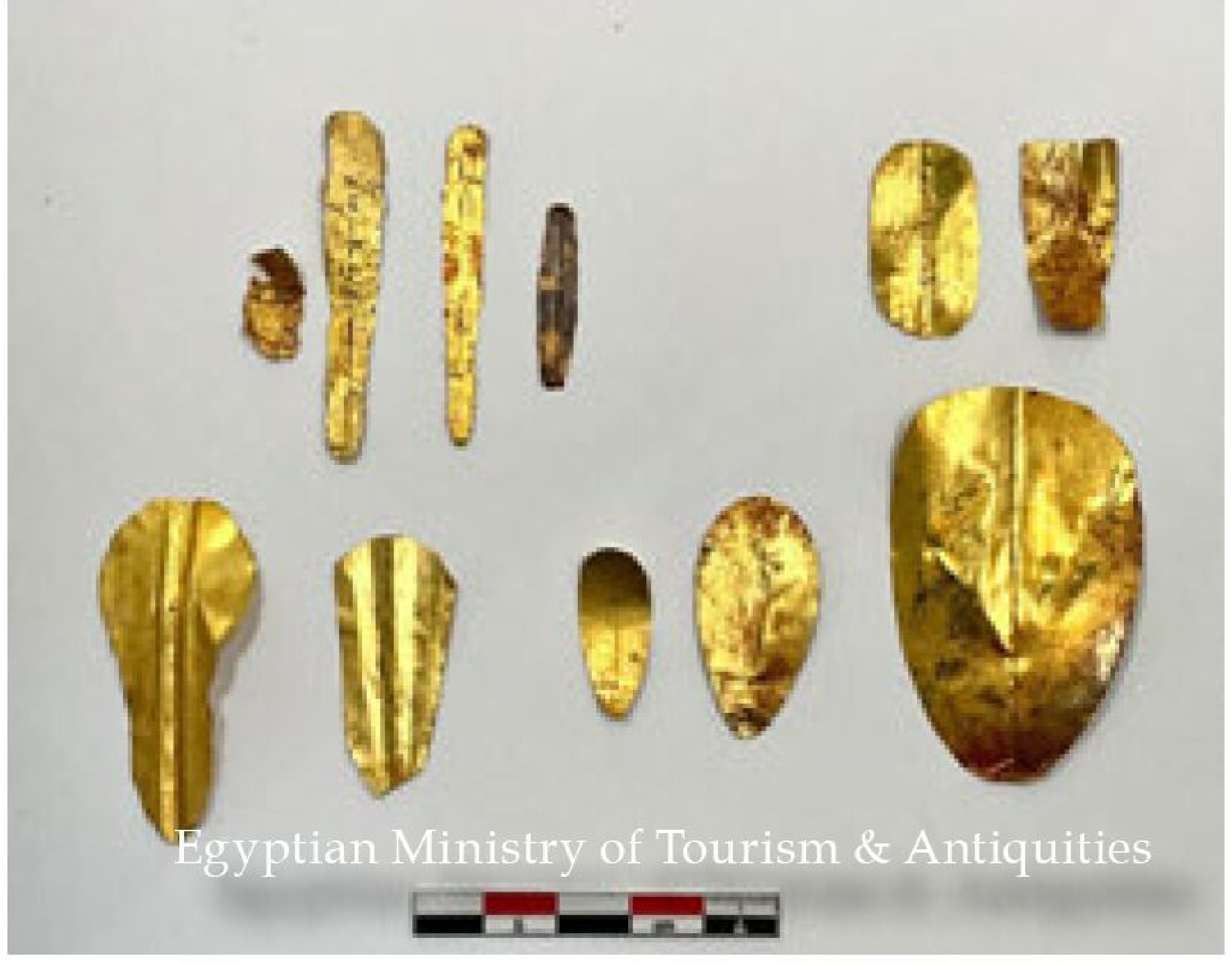

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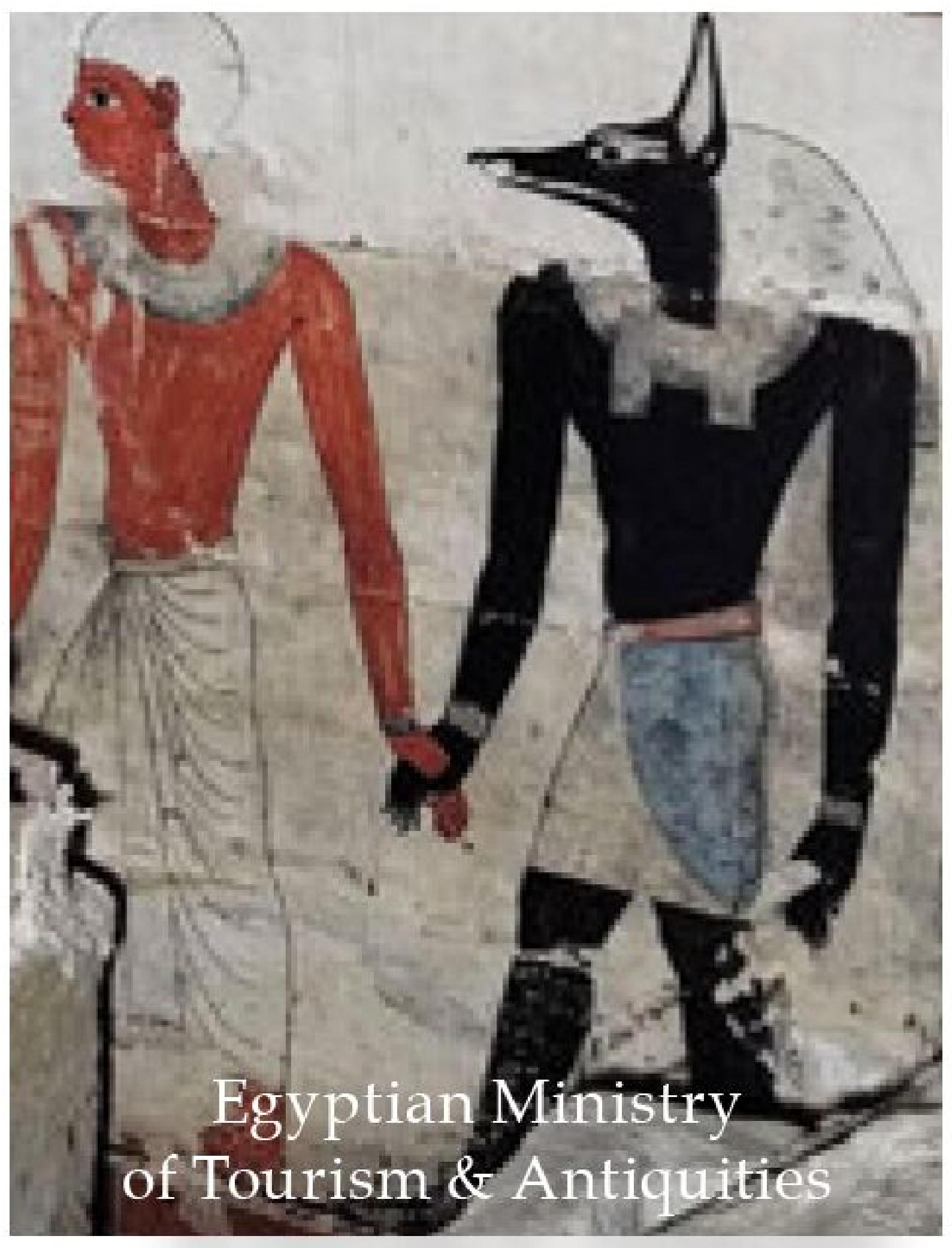

Egyptian Ministry
of Tourism & Antiquities

NOTRE DAME REVIVAL AND DISCOVERIES

The 2019 fire that devastated Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris granted archaeologists with an extraordinary opportunity to excavate beneath its centuries-old floors. French laws on preventive archaeology allowed the dig to begin in February 2022, yielding remarkable discoveries.

More than 1,000 fragments of artwork and over 100 graves were unearthed, bringing the total number of burials to more than 500. Among the most notable finds were a lead sarcophagus, possibly linked to the poet Joachim du Bellay, and life-sized limestone statues, including a striking figure of Christ. The excavation also revealed how medieval artisans constructed the cathedral: century-old oak beams transported along the Seine River bore rope marks, and iron clamps in the stonework marked Notre Dame as the first Gothic cathedral to incorporate iron.

Meanwhile, restoration workers meticulously revived the cathedral using medieval techniques, restoring the exterior and interior of the cathedral with historic precision, from the organs to the stained-glass windows. This past December, Notre Dame reopened with a grand celebration, drawing visitors from around the globe to honor its stunning revival from ruin.

RARE DINOSAUR TRACKS UNCOVERED IN OXFORDSHIRE QUARRY

Researchers have uncovered about 200 dinosaur footprints dating back 166 million years, the largest such discovery in the United Kingdom. Uncovered at Dewars Farm Quarry in Oxfordshire, they offer a rare glimpse into the Middle Jurassic period.

In 2023, a worker at the quarry noticed unusual "bumps" while digging, leading to the discovery of dinosaur tracks. A large-scale excavation followed in June 2024, involving more than 100 scientists, volunteers, and students from Oxford University and the University of Birmingham. The team uncovered five trackways spanning 164 to 492 feet. One trackway likely belonged to a three-toed, two-ton carnivorous *Megalosaurus*, while the others were made by giant herbivorous sauropods, possibly *Diplodocus* or *Cetiosaurus*.

The tracks provide valuable insights into dinosaur locomotion, size, speed, and their ancient environment. Using more than 20,000 photographs, researchers created 3D models of the site and individual footprints. During the Middle Jurassic, Oxfordshire was a temperate sea with mudflats and lagoons. *Megalosaurus*, a formidable predator reaching up to 30 feet, likely walked at about 3 miles per hour, close to the average human pace. The area surrounding the tracks has now been designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest.

Dewars Farm dinosaur excavation.
Image credit Emma Nicholls OUMNH2.

BOROBUDUR TEMPLE IN CENTRAL JAVA, INDONESIA

Each year, Buddhists around the world gather to celebrate Vesak Day, or Waisak, with Borobudur Temple in Central Java, Indonesia, serving as a major center of devotion. Observed on the full moon of Vesakha, typically in April or May, the day marks the birth, enlightenment, and death of Gautama Buddha, the founder of Buddhism. Built in the 9th century by the Sailendra Dynasty, Borobudur is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and the world's largest Buddhist temple. Rituals include prayers, meditation, and the release of lanterns, symbolizing enlightenment and peace.

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LUXOR TEMPLE IN LUXOR, EGYPT

The majestic Karnak and Luxor temples, linked by the 1.7-mile Avenue of Sphinxes—restored and reopened in 2021—were central to the ancient Opet Festival. Celebrated annually during the flooding of the Nile (mid-July to mid-November) from at least the 18th Dynasty (circa 1550 BC), this grand event honored Amun, Mut, and Khonsu with processions of their statues from Karnak to Luxor and back. The festival ceased by the late 4th century AD with the rise of Christianity, though its echoes live on in the Abu el-Haggag Festival, a local Islamic celebration.

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Spotlight

Festivals and Celebrations of the Ancient World

Amazing New Year’s Traditions

AROUND THE WORLD

Each January 1, many countries celebrate the start of a new year. But there is nothing new about New Year’s. For millennia, festivals have marked this occasion, often tied to agricultural cycles or astronomical events. Today, while many see the festivities as a chance to drink and be merry, their origins tell a deeper story. This article explores New Year’s customs, past and present, and the enduring roots that continue to shape them.

By Cecilia Bogaard, Ashley Cowie, and Joanna Gillan

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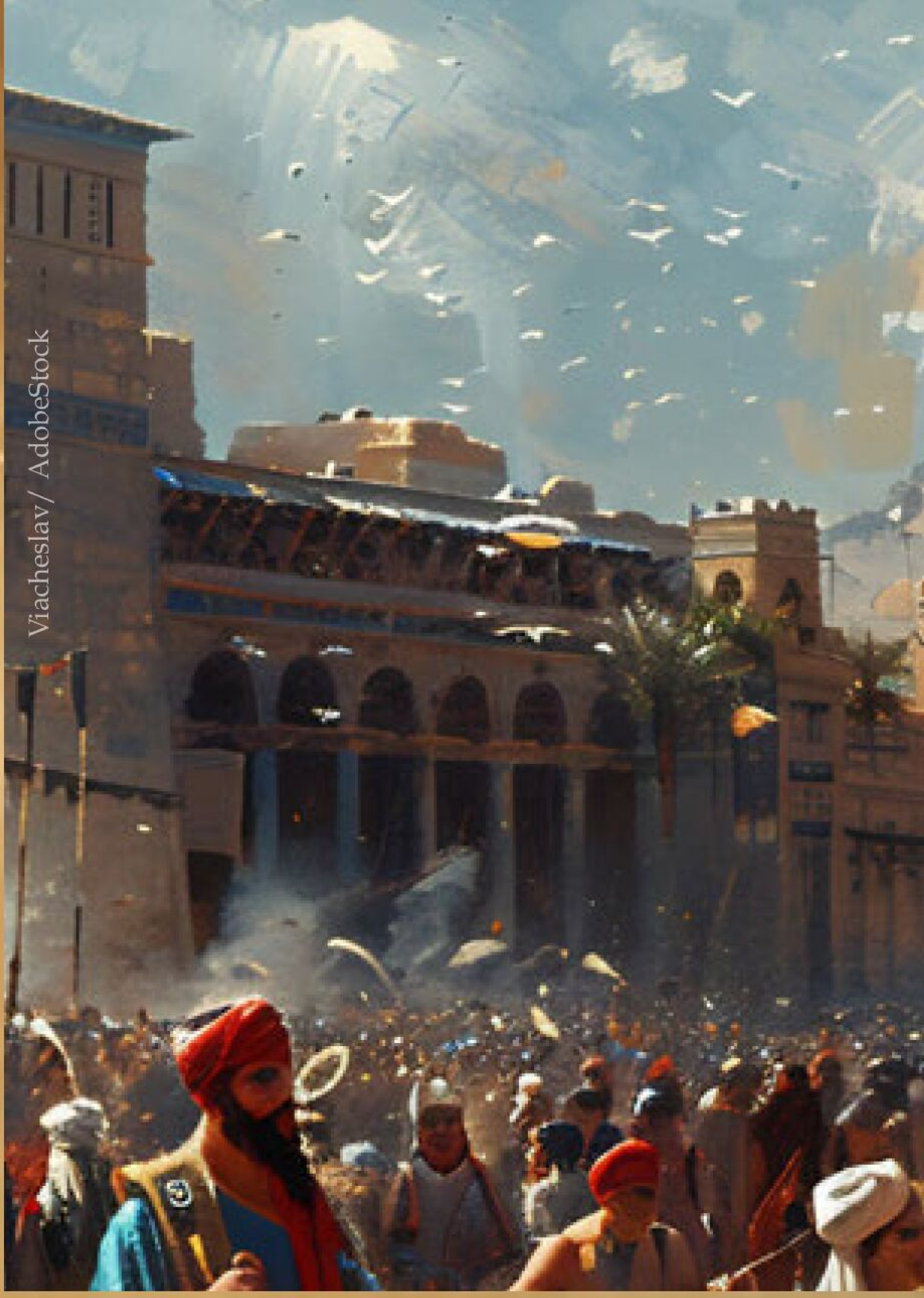

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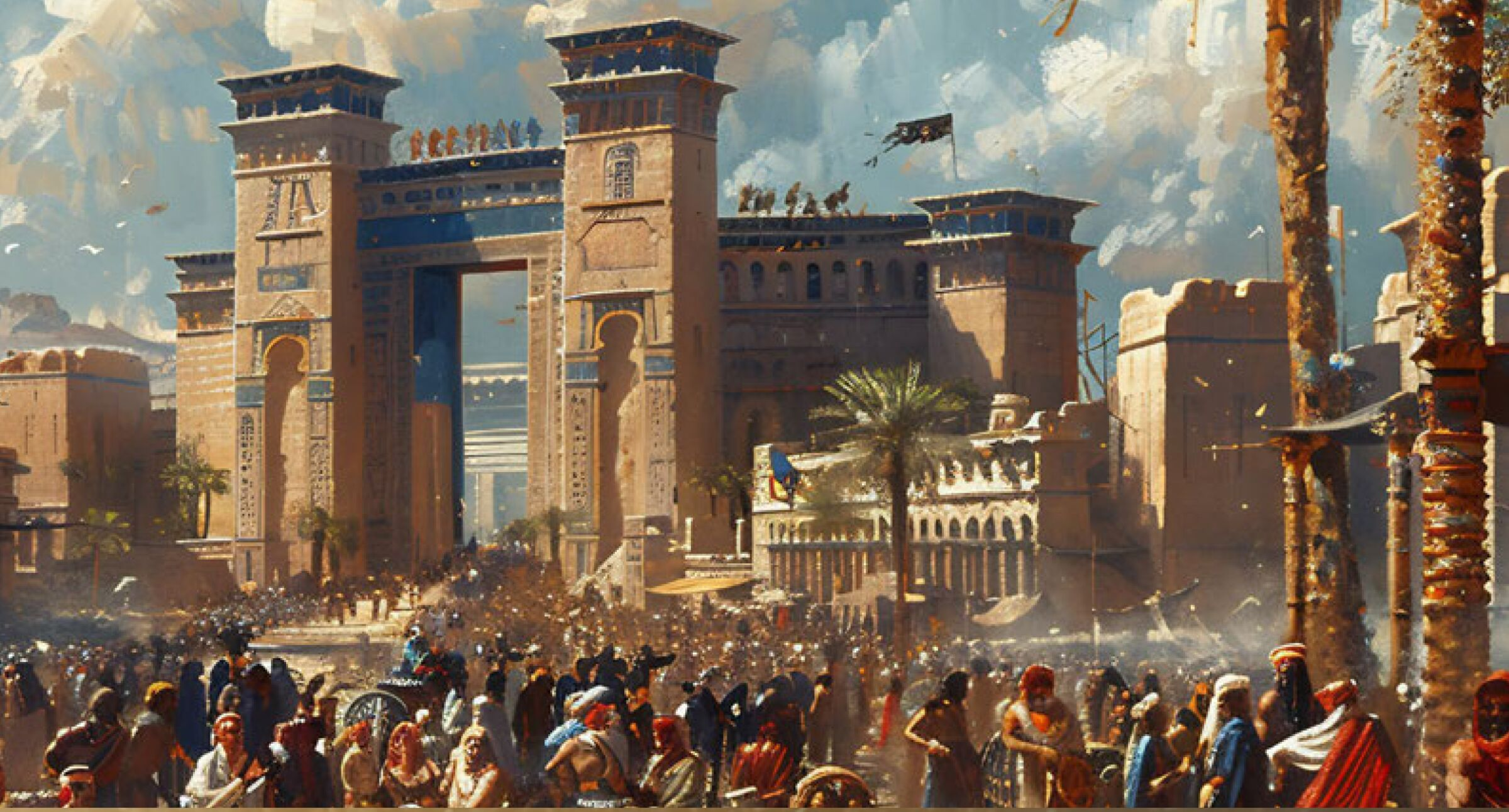
Babylon’s 4,000-Year-Old New Year Festival

Akitu



The earliest recorded New Year's celebration dates back some 4,000 years to ancient Babylon. For the Babylonians, the year began in March during the spring season, coinciding with the vernal equinox in the Northern Hemisphere, when day and night are nearly equal. This event symbolized the renewal of nature and the start of the agricultural cycle. This event was commemorated with Akitu, an elaborate 11-day religious festival whose name derives from the Sumerian word for barley, a key crop harvested In spring.

During Akitu, statues of the gods were paraded through the streets, and rituals symbolized their triumph over chaos. These ceremonies were believed to cleanse and renew the world, preparing it for the new year and the return of spring.

During Akitu, statues of the gods were paraded through the streets, and rituals symbolized their triumph over chaos. These ceremonies were believed to cleanse and renew the world, preparing it for the new year and the return of spring. The festival also celebrated the mythical victory of the sky god Marduk over the sea goddess Tiamat, reinforcing Babylonian cosmology.

Akitu carried political significance as well. It marked the crowning of a new king or reaffirmed the reigning monarch's divine mandate. A peculiar ritual of the festival involved the king being stripped of his regalia, slapped, and dragged by his ears before a statue of Marduk. If the king wept, it was seen as a sign that the gods approved of his rule and symbolically extended his reign.

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Chinese New Year and the Bloodthirsty BEAST

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Also called the Spring Festival, it is one of the world's oldest traditions, dating back nearly three millennia to the Shang Dynasty. Originally tied to the agricultural cycle, the Chinese New Year marked the sowing of spring seeds.

ASIA

The Lunar New Year begins with the second new moon after the winter solstice, typically falling in late January or early February. Popularly known as Chinese New Year, this celebration is observed by millions across China, Korea, Vietnam, and other countries. Also called the Spring Festival, it is one of the world's oldest traditions, dating back nearly three millennia to the Shang Dynasty. Originally tied to the agricultural cycle, the Chinese New Year marked the sowing of spring seeds. Over time, it became steeped in legends and myths.

One enduring tale tells of Nian, a fearsome creature whose name became the Chinese word for "year." Nian was said to terrorize villages annually, devouring crops and livestock. To protect themselves, villagers hung red decorations, burned bamboo to make loud noises, and lit bright fires to scare the beast away. These efforts succeeded, and Nian fled. Today, red ornaments, loud celebrations, and fireworks remain central to Chinese New Year, symbolizing renewal and protection.

The holiday is also marked by family gatherings, lion and dragon dances, firecrackers, and the giving of red envelopes containing money for good luck. Each year is associated with one of twelve zodiac animals, such as the dragon, tiger, or pig, reflecting the holiday's rich cultural and astrological traditions.

Nowruz

and the Persian New Year

The Persian New Year, otherwise called *Nowruz* (or *Norooz*), is a 13-day spring festival that reaches far back into antiquity, though many of the traditions associated with it are still celebrated in Iran and other parts of the Middle East and Asia. The festival is celebrated on or around the vernal equinox in March and is believed to have originated as part of the Zoroastrian religion.

Official records of Nowruz did not appear until the 2nd century, but most historians believe its celebration dates back at least as far as the 6th century BC. Unlike many other ancient Persian festivals, Nowruz persisted as an important holiday even after Iran's conquest by Alexander the Great in 333 BC and the rise of Islamic rule in the 7th century AD.

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Ancient observances of Nowruz focused on the rebirth that accompanied the return of spring. Traditions included feasts, exchanging presents with family members and neighbors, lighting bonfires, dyeing eggs and sprinkling water to symbolize creation. Nowruz has evolved considerably over time, but many of its ancient traditions—particularly the use of bonfires and colored eggs—remain a part of the modern holiday, which is observed by an estimated 300 million people each year.

Official records of Nowruz did not appear until the 2nd century, but most historians believe its celebration dates back at least as far as the 6th century BC.

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The Joya no at Japanese

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During Joya no Kane, a large temple bell is struck exactly 108 times — a number that, according to Buddhist teachings, represents the 108 earthly desires (*bonnō*) that hinder the path to enlightenment.

Kane Ceremony

New Year

In Buddhist temples worldwide, the arrival of the New Year is marked by the striking of gongs or bells, symbolizing the purification of human weaknesses and desires. This practice is especially prominent in Japan, where the tradition, known as Joya no Kane, is a central part of New Year's Eve celebrations.

The *Joya no Kane* ceremony involves priests and temple visitors striking a large temple bell exactly 108 times. According to Buddhist teachings, this number represents the 108 earthly desires (*bonnō*) that humans experience—such as greed, anger, ignorance, jealousy, and attachment—which are believed to obscure the path to enlightenment. By the 108th strike, it is thought that participants have symbolically purged themselves of the past year's defilements, entering the new year with a cleansed and renewed mind.

One of the most famous sites for this tradition is Chion-in Temple in Kyoto. Known for its massive bell, weighing about 70 tons, the ceremony requires 17 monks to ring it. The deeply resonant sound of the bell reverberates through the temple grounds, creating a reflective and spiritual atmosphere. This ritual is rooted in Buddhist philosophy, which emphasizes letting go of attachments and desires to alleviate suffering.

Rebirth and Renewal During Egyptian Wepet Ren

The ancient Egyptians celebrated their New Year, *Wepet Renpet*—"the opening of the year"—as a time of rebirth and renewal, closely tied to the cycles of the Nile River. The New Year was marked by the heliacal rising of Sirius (Sothis), the brightest star in the night sky, following a 70-day absence. This celestial event,

The Procession of the Bull Apis by Frederick Arthur Bridgman, 1879. Public domain

which typically occurred in mid-July, signaled the imminent inundation of the Nile, an annual flood that replenished farmland and ensured agricultural prosperity.

Wepet Renpet was honored with feasts, offerings, and religious ceremonies, emphasizing renewal and the cosmic order.

Recent discoveries at the Temple of Mut have shown that during the reign of Hatshepsut, the first month of the year also featured the Festival of Drunkenness. This festival was inspired by the myth of Sekhmet, the lion-headed war goddess sent by Ra to punish humanity. To prevent her from destroying the world, Ra tricked Sekhmet into drinking beer dyed red to resemble blood. Intoxicated, she fell into a stupor, sparing humankind.

To commemorate this act of divine mercy, Egyptians would celebrate with music, sex, revelry, and copious amounts of beer. These festivities reflected themes of renewal, survival, and cosmic harmony, blending mythology with communal joy at the start of a new year.

pet

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The Ethiopian Enqutatash

Ethiopian New Year, known as Enkutatash, is celebrated annually on September 11, or September 12 during leap years. The holiday aligns with the Ge'ez calendar, an ancient system that Ethiopia has preserved for centuries and which is seven to eight years behind the Gregorian calendar.

Enkutatash marks the end of the rainy season, a time when Ethiopia's highlands burst into a sea of yellow with the blooming of daisies known as Adey Abeba. It is a season of renewal and hope, where elders bless the young, and families come together to reflect on the past year and welcome new opportunities.

According to Ethiopian tradition, Enkutatash is also tied to the legend of the Queen of Sheba, who is said to have returned to Ethiopia after visiting King Solomon in Jerusalem around 980 BC. The holiday's name, meaning "gift of jewels," is believed to refer to the jewels presented to her upon her return.

Modern celebrations include the burning of twig bundles in front of homes to symbolize the end of the old year. Families gather to slaughter animals, bake blessed bread, and brew *Tella*, a traditional beer. Enkutatash is celebrated across Ethiopia by people of all religions and cultures, making it a unifying time of joy and renewal.

Enkutatash marks the end of the rainy season, a time when Ethiopia's highlands burst into a sea of yellow with the blooming of daisies known as Adey Abeba.

AFRICA

Scottish Hogmanay

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Residents of Scotland mark the arrival of the New Year with particular zeal during Hogmanay. Rooted in a history of Viking invasions, superstition, and ancient pagan rituals celebrating the winter solstice. Roman celebrations of the hedonistic winter festival of Saturnalia and Viking celebrations of Yule (the origin of the 12 days of Christmas) have also left their mark. These celebrations and other ceremonies evolved over the centuries to become the Hogmanay holiday celebrated in Scotland today. During the Middle Ages, the pre-existing pagan winter festivals were overshadowed by the feasts surrounding Christmas, and the New Year was moved to coincide with Christian holy days. Following the Reformation in Scotland, however, celebration of Christmas was discouraged, and so the gift-giving and celebration that accompanied Christmas elsewhere took place at New Year, giving rise to the uniquely Scottish celebration of Hogmanay.

Fire remains central to Hogmanay, echoing ancient practices where flames symbolized the return of the

> Fire remains central to Hogmanay, echoing ancient practices where flames symbolized the return of the sun and bonfires were believed to ward off evil spirits.

sun and bonfires were believed to ward off evil spirits. This can explain why torchlight processions, bonfires, and fireworks play a major role in modern-day Hogmanay celebrations.

Another custom known as “first footing” dictates that the first person to cross a home’s threshold after midnight on New Year’s Eve will determine the homeowner’s luck for the New Year. The ideal visitor bears gifts—preferably whiskey, coal for the fire, small cakes, or a coin—and should be a man with a dark complexion. Why? The answer dates back to the 8th century, when the fair-haired Vikings invaded Scotland. The memory persists, and even today, blond visitors are still considered harbingers of misfortune.

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EUROPE

Twelve Grapes

at Midnight in Spain

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Few customs are as quintessentially Spanish as eating 12 grapes at the stroke of midnight on New Year's Eve. Known as *las doce uvas de la suerte* (the 12 grapes of luck), the tradition is both a symbol of good fortune and a peculiar nod to Spain's history.

Widely believed to have originated from a bumper crop of grapes in Alicante in 1909—when winemakers supposedly invented the tradition to offload surplus fruit—this story appears to be nothing more than a baseless rumor, according to Ana Vega (Biscayenne) and María José Sevilla in an interview with *El País' El Comidista.*

The roots of this custom are actually older and more complex than they seem. By the late 19th century, Spain's upper classes had embraced the French *réveillon*, a lavish Christmas and New Year's Eve feast that dates to the Middle Ages, complete with champagne and grapes. Grapes, a typical winter dessert, quickly became a symbol of sophistication, inspiring Madrid's bourgeoisie to follow suit. Eventually, the tradition trickled down to lower-income families, eager to emulate the wealthy.

Initially, the custom involved eating three grapes, but it grew to 12—matching the 12 chimes of mechanical clocks, which strike once for each hour at midnight. This rhythmic alignment—12 chimes, 12 grapes, 12 months of good luck—gave this Spanish tradition its charm. Simple yet nerve-wracking, it unites Spaniards across generations as they say goodbye to the old year and welcome the new.

SOUTH AMERICA

Few New Year traditions are more vibrant than the creation and burning of *Año Viejo* effigies on the night of December 31 in Ecuador. These figures—often representing political leaders, celebrities, or personal acquaintances—embody the struggles and triumphs of the year gone by. Crafted with care and humor, they provide a communal outlet for reflection, grievance, and hope.

The tradition has deep historical roots. According to Juana Córdova in *Revista Artesanías de América*, it echoes ancient Roman rituals where effigies symbolizing evil were burned for renewal. Similar customs can be seen in Spain's *Fallas* celebrations and the Judas effigy burnings during Easter. Indigenous Andean rituals and Spanish colonial influences have also shaped this tradition. Archival records reveal that Indigenous communities in Otavalo burned effigies of feudal lords during solstice festivals.

The shift to New Year's Eve is traced to the 19th century. During a yellow fever outbreak in Guayaquil, effigies made from victims' clothing were burned to ward off disease. Today, they symbolize the purging of misfortunes. Accompanied by laughter, music, and the humorous reading of "wills" for the doomed effigies, this fiery ritual offers catharsis and a fresh start, blending satire and hope as Ecuadorians embrace the new year.

Ecuadorian Effigies

on New Year’s Eve

These figures—often representing political leaders, celebrities, or personal acquaintances—embody the struggles and triumphs of the year gone by.

Iryna/ AdobeStock

SOUTH AMERICA

Jumping Waves

at Brazilian *Réveillon* Celebrations

In Brazil, the act of jumping seven waves at midnight on New Year's Eve is more than a playful tradition—it is a ritual deeply rooted in Afro-Brazilian spirituality and cultural syncretism. Participants, dressed in white to symbolize peace and renewal, make seven wishes as they leap, with each wave representing a request for the year ahead.

The tradition originates with Iemanjá, the Afro-Brazilian goddess of the sea, revered in Candomblé and Umbanda religions. Brought to Brazil by enslaved Africans from the Yoruba tradition during the transatlantic slave trade, Iemanjá is a maternal figure associated with protection, abundance, and fertility. Over time, her worship merged with Catholic iconography, where she is often equated with Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, creating a uniquely Brazilian spiritual practice.

These traditions thrive in coastal cities such as Rio de Janeiro, Salvador, and Recife. However, the increasing popularity of *Réveillon* festivities at Copacabana—which draw millions annually for the firework displays—has led many followers of Afro-Brazilian religions to perform their rituals a few days earlier to avoid the crowds. Offerings to Iemanjá, including flowers, perfumes, and candles, are cast into the sea alongside the wave-jumping.

The number seven, significant in Umbanda for its connection to Exu (Iemanjá's son) and the Seven Lines of Umbanda spirits, imbues the ritual with deeper meaning. This blend of African, Indigenous, and Catholic traditions captures the essence of Brazil's cultural history, as Brazilians leap into the new year.

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> The act of jumping seven waves at midnight on New Year’s Eve is more than a playful tradition—it is a ritual deeply rooted in Afro-Brazilian spirituality and cultural syncretism.

OCEANIA

Matariki was, and remains, a time to honor those who have passed during the year while welcoming a new cycle with feasting, dancing, and storytelling.

The Māori
New Year

Matariki, the Māori name for the Pleiades star cluster, marks the Māori New Year and carries deep cultural and spiritual significance in New Zealand. The date varies each year, depending on the first appearance of the Matariki cluster in the pre-dawn sky, typically between late May and early July during mid-winter in the Southern Hemisphere. Traditionally, it marked the end of the annual harvest and its reappearance heralded a period of remembrance, renewal, and celebration.

Matariki was, and remains, a time to honor those who have passed during the year while welcoming a new cycle with feasting, dancing, and storytelling. In recent years, kite flying (*manu tukutuku*) is often included in Matariki celebrations, reflecting the Māori belief that kites serve as conduits to connect with ancestors and the cosmos.

The origins of Matariki are steeped in Māori mythology. The word itself holds dual meanings: *mata ariki* ("eyes of God") and *mata riki* ("little eyes"). According to Māori creation myths, Tāwhirimātea, the god of storms and winds, tore out his eyes in grief over the separation of his parents, Ranginui (sky father) and Papatūānuku (earth mother), casting them into the heavens as stars. These celestial bodies became a guiding symbol of renewal and connection to ancestors.

Johannes/ AdobeStock

After centuries of colonial suppression, Matariki celebrations have seen a revival since the early 2000s. In 2022, it was officially recognized as a public holiday. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern described the day as an opportunity to embrace New Zealand's unique cultural identity. The celebration has become a vibrant expression of Māori heritage, blending myth, astronomy, and community.

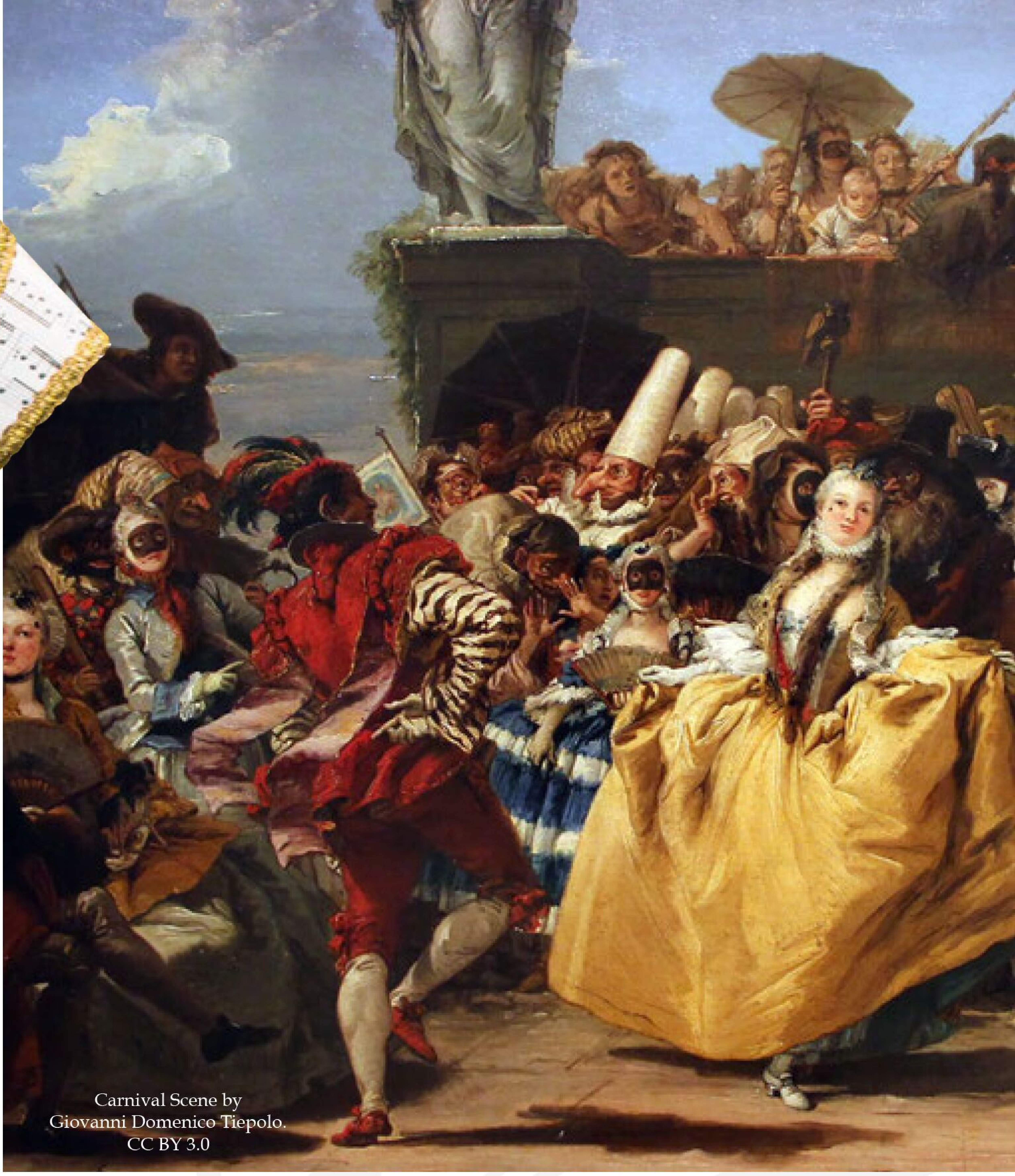
Dmitriy/ AdobeStock

The History of Venice Carnival

AND ITS UNFORGETTABLE MASKS

BY NATHAN FALDE

Lulu/AdobeStock



Carnival Scene by Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo. CC BY 3.0

In February of 2025, up to three million visitors from all over the world will fill the streets and canals of Venice, arriving to enjoy one of the year's most raucous and memorable celebrations. This is the Carnival of Venice, an annual 10-day extravaganza that brings enthusiastic crowds to one of Europe's most famous and picturesque cities.

The pageantry and revelry associated with the Venice Carnival is legendary. This incredible event dates back to the 12th century, making it the oldest festival of its type celebrated anywhere in Europe. It is known primarily for its brightly colored and elaborate costumes, which almost all attendees will be wearing in 2025, just as they were many centuries ago.

Without any doubt, the most prominent feature of these costumes are the decorative masks that act as their centerpieces. The masks of the Venice Carnival are its true signature, which is why veteran carnival goers and newcomers alike invest a significant amount of time and energy choosing the perfect mask to make the best impression.

The First Carnival

While the Venice Carnival is known now for the pure sense of joy and freedom it evokes, and for the unrestrained party atmosphere that defines it, the tradition actually has its roots in military and political turmoil.

In 1162 the Venetian Republic scored a decisive victory over the army of the Patriarch of Aquileia (another Italian city), Ulrich II van Treven. As a result of their success Venice retained its freedom, staving off the efforts of van Treven to force Venice to cede its independence and join the Holy Roman Empire under the

> As word of their city's triumph spread, the people of Venice poured into the streets in jubilation, and every year after that the people returned to the streets on the anniversary of their victory to renew the celebration.

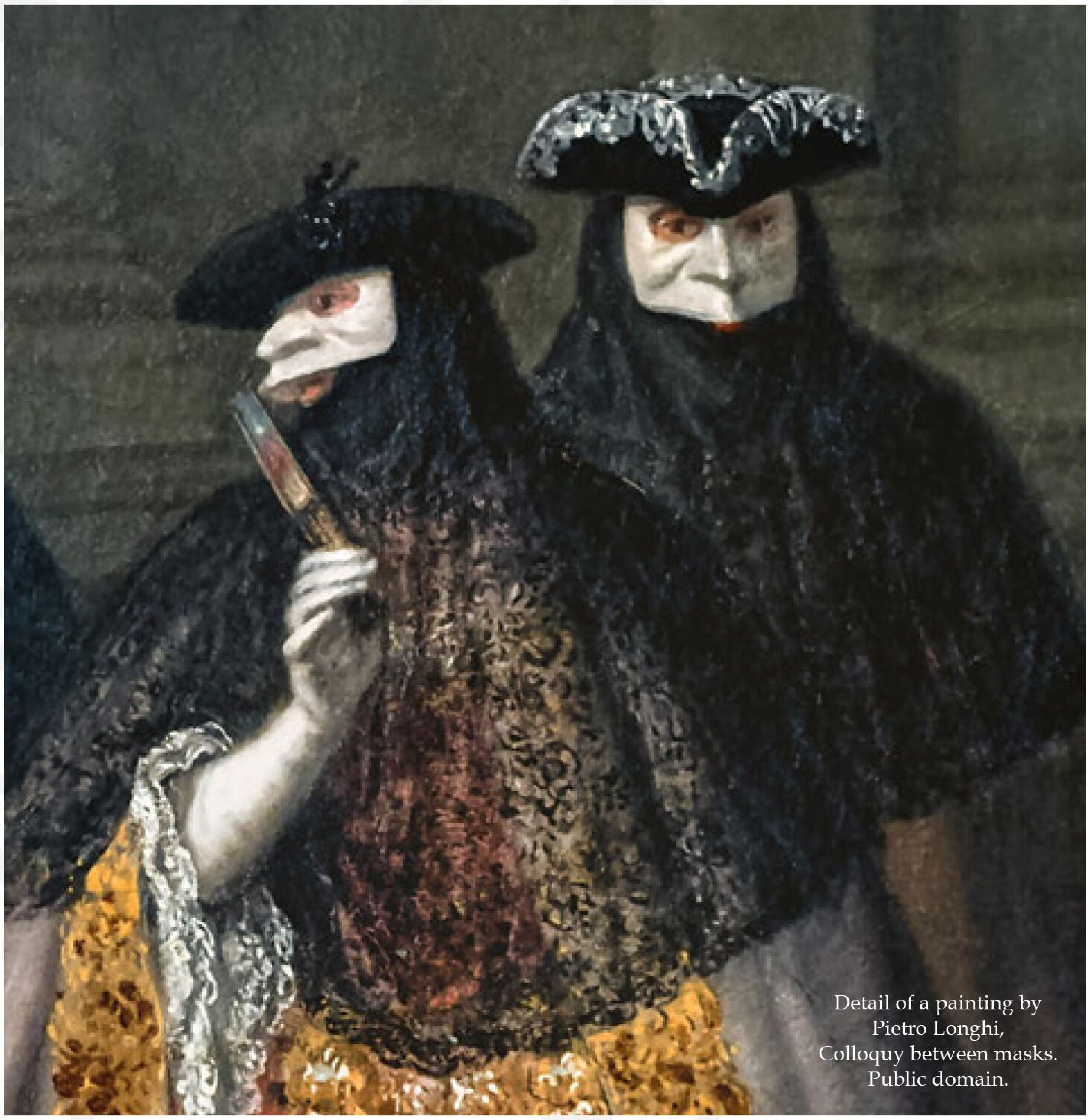
authority of its autocratic leader, the emperor Frederick I.

As word of their city's triumph spread, the people of Venice poured into the streets in jubilation, and every year after that the people returned to the streets on the anniversary of their victory to renew the celebration. Over time this became an organized event, transforming from a spontaneous outburst to a yearly festival of delights that began to attract people from throughout the region.

Venetians were united in a common cause during the first and all subsequent celebrations, with citizens of all classes joining together to express their joy at their republic's preservation of its independence. This was a key element that drove the Carnival's popularity, as the republic of Venice had one of the most rigid social hierarchies in Europe in the Middle Ages and only during the Carnival were the normal social rules suspended. That was how it would remain when the Carnival became an organized yearly observance, as people prized the sense of unity that was associated with these annual celebrations.

> The republic of Venice had one of the most rigid social hierarchies in Europe in the Middle Ages and only during the Carnival were the normal social rules suspended.

By the dawn of the 13th century, the original meaning of the Carnival had been largely forgotten. It morphed into the biggest yearly party medieval Europe would ever see, attended by many who had only the vaguest idea about the events that motivated its launch. It wasn't until 1296 that the Senate in Venice passed a resolution officially declaring the Venice Carnival a recognized public festival, although by this time the tradition had become so popular and well-established that trying to prohibit it would have set off a riot.



Detail of a painting by
Pietro Longhi,
Colloquy between masks.
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Lisa Yount/Pixabay

The Carnival Mask Makes its Entrance

It isn't known exactly when people began to wear costumes and don the masks for which the Venice Carnival became famous. Evidence suggests this practice was adopted sometime during the 13th century, as the costumes helped to emphasize the egalitarian nature of the festival, which welcomed everyone equally regardless of their class identity or political status. In costumes and masks, everyone looked alike, their differences defined only by the disguises they chose.

Hidden behind increasingly elaborate masks, each person who attended the carnival was able to preserve their anonymity. This gave them the freedom to be as unrestrained as they wanted to be, without having to worry that anyone would recognize them or hold them accountable for anything they might say or do (as long as it was within the bounds of the law, of course).

There were two types of masks worn at the Venice Carnival in the first century of its existence, and these were known as the *bauta* and the *moretta*. The bauta was a full-face mask worn over the head and shoulders, often featuring an exaggerated long nose and always topped off with a wide-brimmed hat. It usually came in white and could be worn by either men or women. It was always worn in combination with an elaborate costume of some sort, making it virtually impossible for even a person's closest family member or friend to recognize them.

The bauta is the style of mask that came to be most closely associated with the Venice Carnival, and it has never gone out of style. Many

Evidence suggests this practice was adopted sometime during the 13th century, as the costumes helped to emphasize the egalitarian nature of the festival, which welcomed everyone equally regardless of their class identity or political status.

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of the more colorful and creative masks worn during Carnival times are simply variations on this foundational theme, highlighting the efforts of Carnival enthusiasts to keep in touch with the celebration's historical roots.

The moretta was much simpler. It was plain and black and was only intended to be worn by women. It was smaller, covering essentially the middle part of the face, and was often worn by women of wealth and status even when they weren't attending events connected to the Carnival. The mask was made from velvet, and because it had no clasp the woman wearing it had to hold it in place by biting down on a button that was installed in the mask at mouth level.

Just as people today feel emboldened to post outrageous comments online under the cloak of anonymity, Venetians shed their inhibitions behind bauta-style masks at social gatherings of every kind. It is said that the notorious 18th century romantic adventurer and convicted criminal Giacomo Casanova often wore a bauta mask and costume to conceal his identity, making it easier to avoid the law while pursuing his various dalliances with upper class Venetian women.

In Medieval Venice, the Carnival Truly Was King

In medieval times, the Venice Carnival wasn't really an isolated event the way it is today. In its older, original form, the Carnival lasted for six weeks, from December 25 through Ash Wednesday in February. It essentially absorbed (or at least coincided with) Venetian observances of Christmas and New Years, and the excitement created by this event helped boost Venice tourism during the winter season.

While everything about the Carnival was designed to create energy and excitement, it was the mask-wearing that proved more popular than any other Carnival-related activity. In fact, it proved so popular that people began wearing masks at different times, reveling in the sense of freedom they enjoyed because of their anonymity.

By the 16th century, the bauta was worn year-round in Venice, prompting local officials to pass laws to regulate its use. The new rules made it illegal for masks to be worn in gambling halls or brothels, by prostitutes in any setting, or by anyone during outbreaks of the plague (an all-too-common occurrence in medieval Venice). But on the other hand, wearing a mask to public ceremonies, when going to the theater, when visiting wine shops, or when celebrating holiday events became virtually a mandatory social custom among Venice's elite. It simply wasn't seen as proper to be out and about on such occasions if one wasn't wearing a mask.

Naturally, none of the restrictive rules applied during Carnival times. Everyone was masked, and the styles of masks worn during this time demonstrated a depth of creativity and imagination that helped mask design evolve into a true artform. It was simply unthinkable for anyone to attend any event related to the Carnival without their mask, which allowed everyone to mingle with everyone else freely and without any concern about social status.

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The Death and Resurrection of the Venice Carnival

In the 18th century, the Venice Carnival reached its peak. By then, it had evolved into a highly organized and well-funded affair, featuring an endless stream of elite balls, parades, plays, and musical performances. Some events unfolded in the private palaces of the wealthy, while others were open to the public in the city's squares.

Skampixelle/AdobeStock

The festivities came to an abrupt end in 1797. That year, the Venetian Republic lost its independence after Napoleon Bonaparte and the French army seized control. Soon after, Venice was handed over to Austria as part of a treaty ending the conflict between Austria and France. The city was absorbed into the Holy Roman Empire, where Emperor Francis II, later the first Emperor of Austria, issued an edict banning the Carnival.

> More than a century later, something unexpected happened. In 1979, the Italian government, eager to boost Venice's economy through tourism, decided to revive the Venice Carnival.

Needless to say, this was a stunning development, and it had a long-lasting impact. Even when Venice regained their independence in 1866, joining the newly created Kingdom of Italy that was free from Austrian control, the Carnival was not resurrected, perhaps because the government of the new Italian state didn't approve of a festival that was so closely associated with the days of the supposedly decadent Venetian Republic.

More than a century later, something unexpected happened. In 1979, the Italian government, eager to boost Venice's economy through tourism, decided to revive the Venice Carnival. Once again, the fabulous costumes and fantastic masks associated with this grand celebration returned to the streets and canals of Venice. The new version of the Carnival was limited to 10 days and separated from other

holidays. But the restoration of the Carnival did in fact prove to be a boon for tourism in Venice, reinvigorating the city's economy while allowing it to finally acknowledge an incredibly important part of its heritage.

The modern version of the Carnival of Venice draws many more celebrants than the original version ever did. However, if time traveling Venetians from the 15th or 16th centuries were to visit Venice during Carnival season now, what they saw and experienced would be immediately recognizable. They would be especially delighted to see the colorful and elaborate costumes and masks everywhere, in living color and dazzling variety. The historical traditions that made the Venice Carnival so unique seven centuries ago have been restored as part of the modern celebration, making it seem as if the Carnival's two centuries in exile never really happened. ■

Pexels

Ancient Legends Behind India's Colorful Celebration

happy holi

BY WU MINGREN

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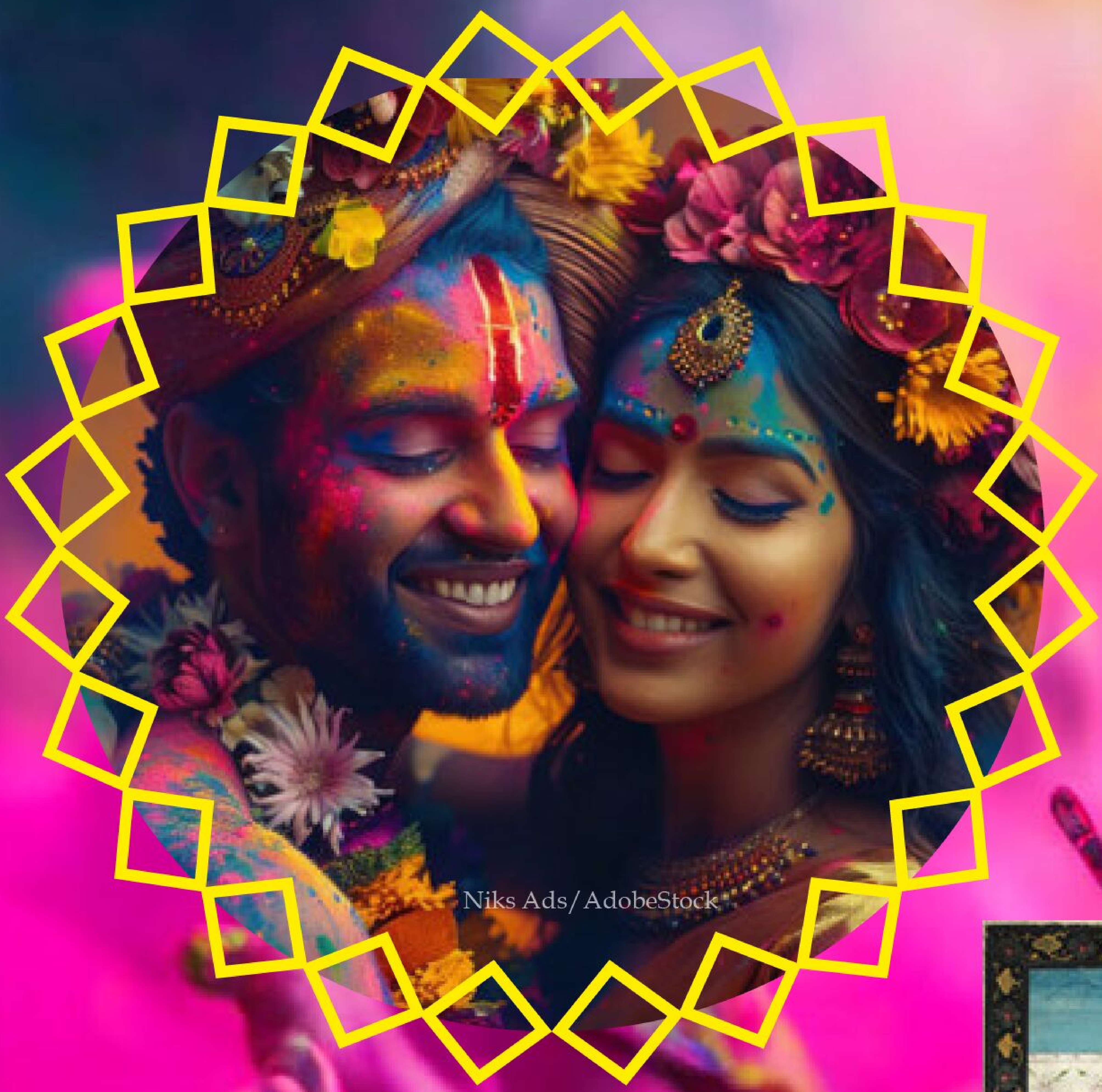

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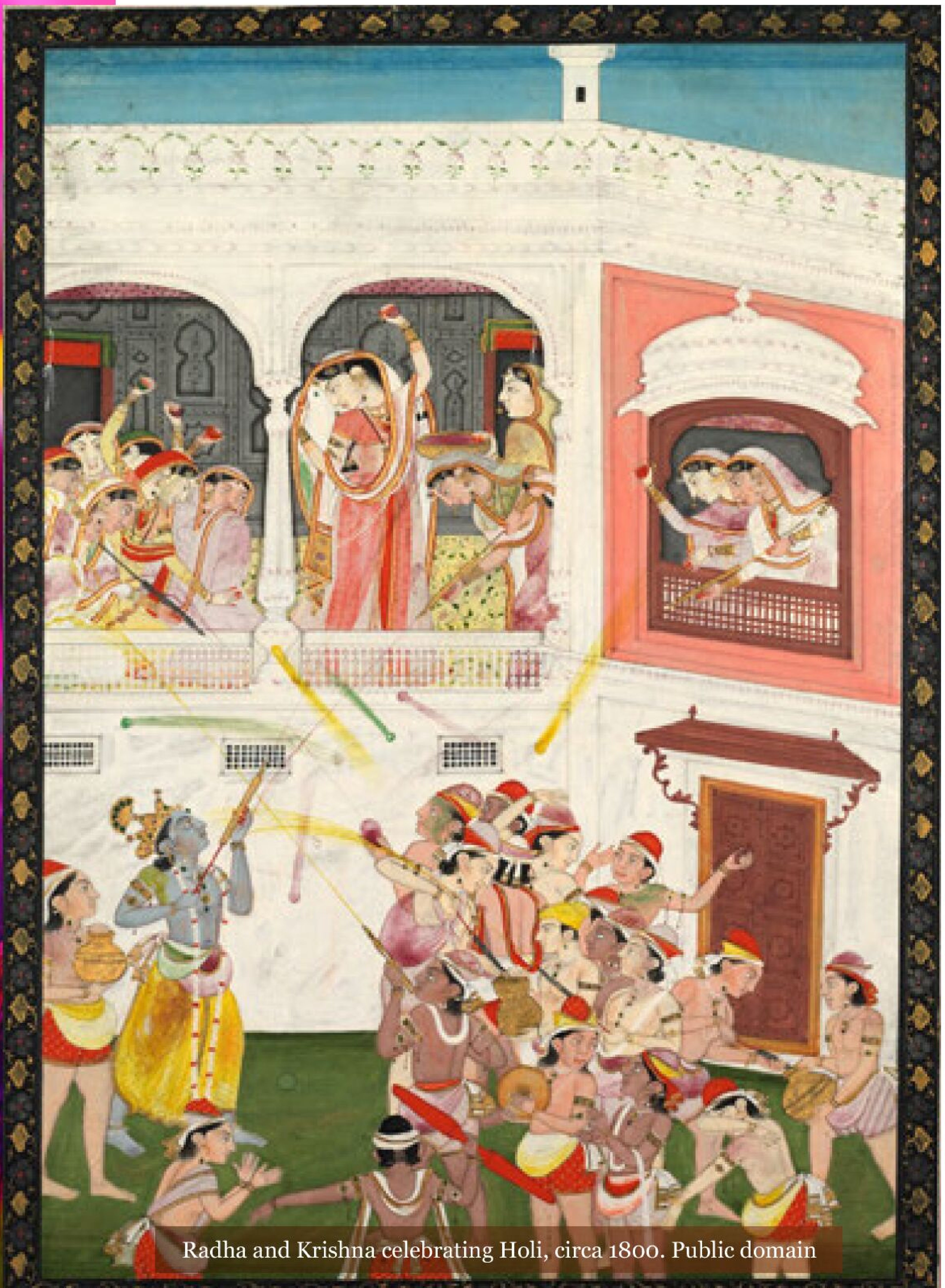
Holi is an ancient Indian spring festival that celebrates love, color, and the triumph of good over evil. Traditionally, it was a major Hindu religious festival in North India, but the fun, vibrancy, unity, and joy associated with Holi have spread to non-Hindus in South Asia and communities around the world.

The popularity of Holi today can be understood by its other name: the "Festival of Colors." One of its defining features is the use of colored powders, called *gulal*, and colored water during the festivities. Several days before the celebration, markets fill with powders in every hue for festivalgoers to purchase. While this is the norm today, some still make the powders themselves, often using flowers or turmeric in their homes.



Radha and Krishna celebrating Holi, circa 1800. Public domain

The vibrant colors of the perfumed powders signify the joy of spring's arrival and the new colors blooming in nature. Each Holi color carries unique symbolism: red represents love and fertility, blue is for Krishna, yellow reflects the spice turmeric, and green symbolizes renewal and new beginnings. But Holi isn't about sticking to one color; by the end of the games, most participants become walking rainbows.

Public domain

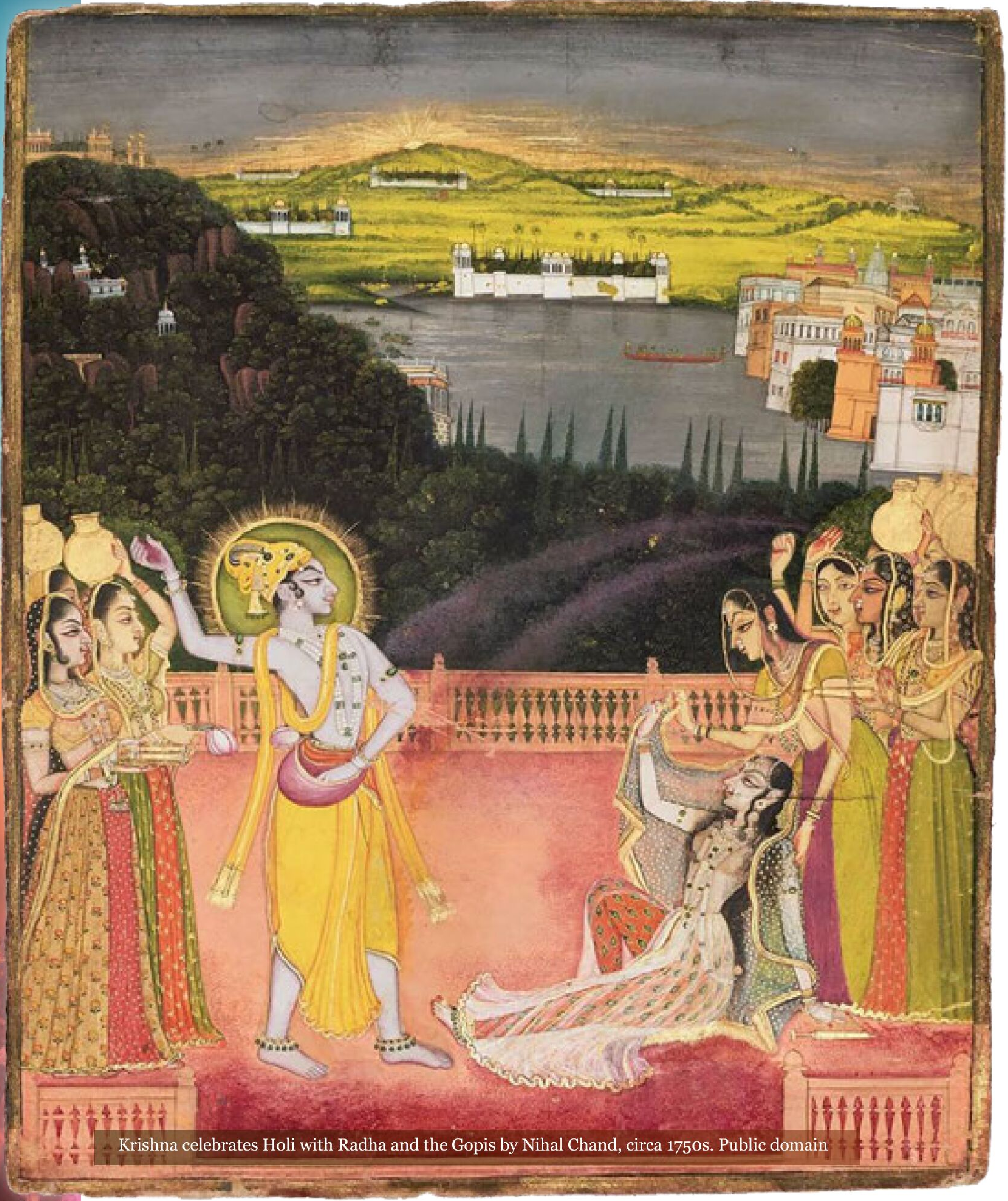
Don't Be Offended, It's Holi!

The coloring of friends and strangers with powder and water is particularly enjoyed by children. However, adults also participate enthusiastically in the color fight that begins on the morning of the festival. Many believe that all the singing, dancing, shouting, and play during Holi help reawaken and rejuvenate the body after a long winter.

The color fight is the highlight of Holi and provides the most recognizable images of the festival. There is a sense of inclusiveness and joy when everyone's skin is

> There is a sense of inclusiveness and joy when everyone's skin is coated in all the vibrant colors. During the celebration, social barriers are broken down, and for a short time, men and women, young and old, rich and poor, and people of all castes are on equal footing.

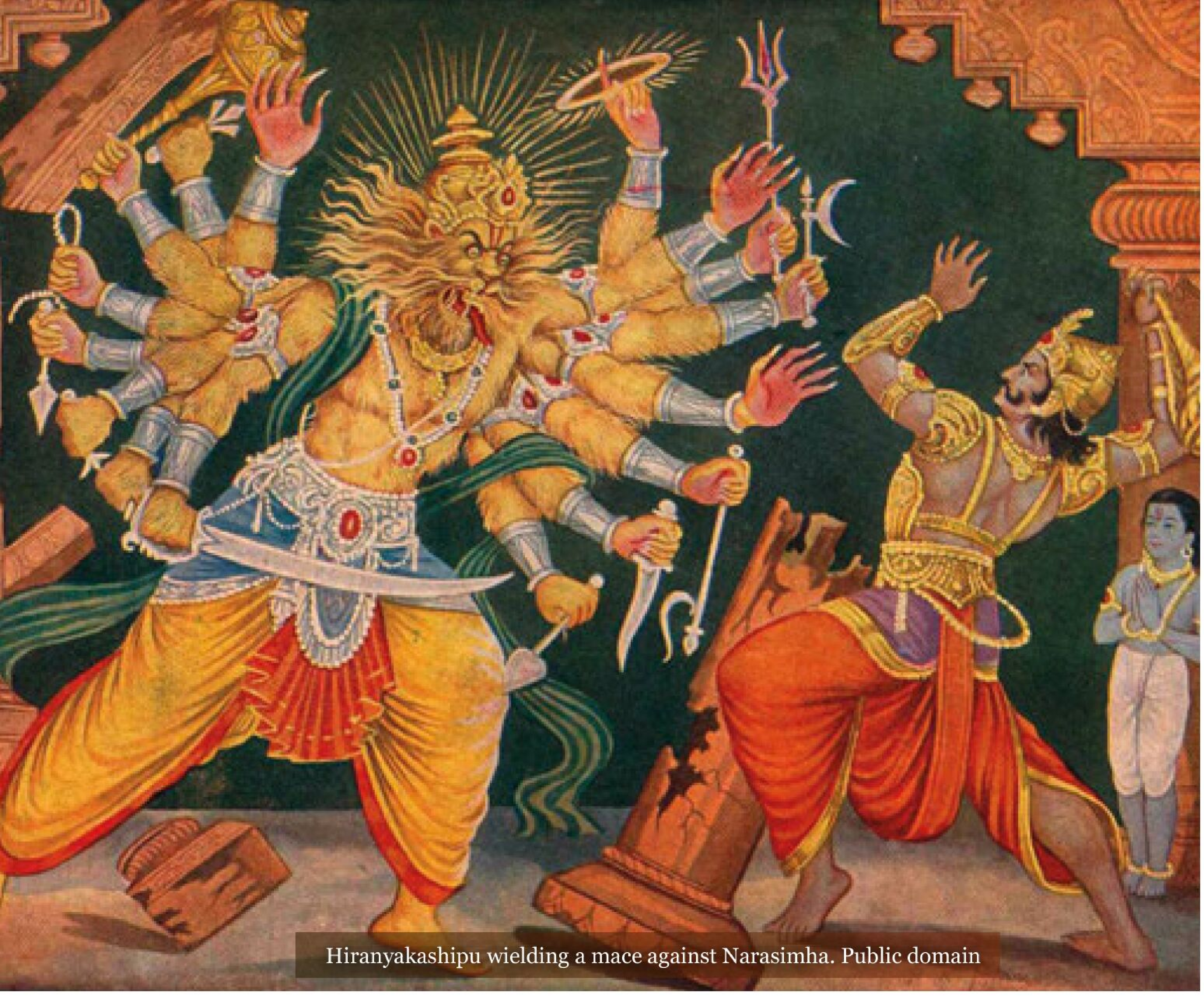
Sirisakboakaew / AdobeStock



Krishna celebrates Holi with Radha and the Gopis by Nihal Chand, circa 1750s. Public domain

coated in all the vibrant colors. During the celebration, social barriers are broken down, and for a short time, men and women, young and old, rich and poor, and people of all castes are on equal footing. For those uncomfortable with this idea, the saying *“Bura na mano, Holi hai!”* (“Don’t be offended, it’s Holi!”) is meant as a gentle, albeit explicit, reminder.

Although Holi is best known today for its party atmosphere, it also has religious significance and ancient origins. References to Holi appear in the Vedas and Puranas, as well as in a stone inscription from 300 BC found at Ramgarh. Sculptures and murals on old temple walls also depict Holi celebrations. For example, a 16th-century panel at a temple in Hampi shows a prince and princess about to be drenched in colored water. This is one of several examples of royalty participating in Holi celebrations during the medieval period.



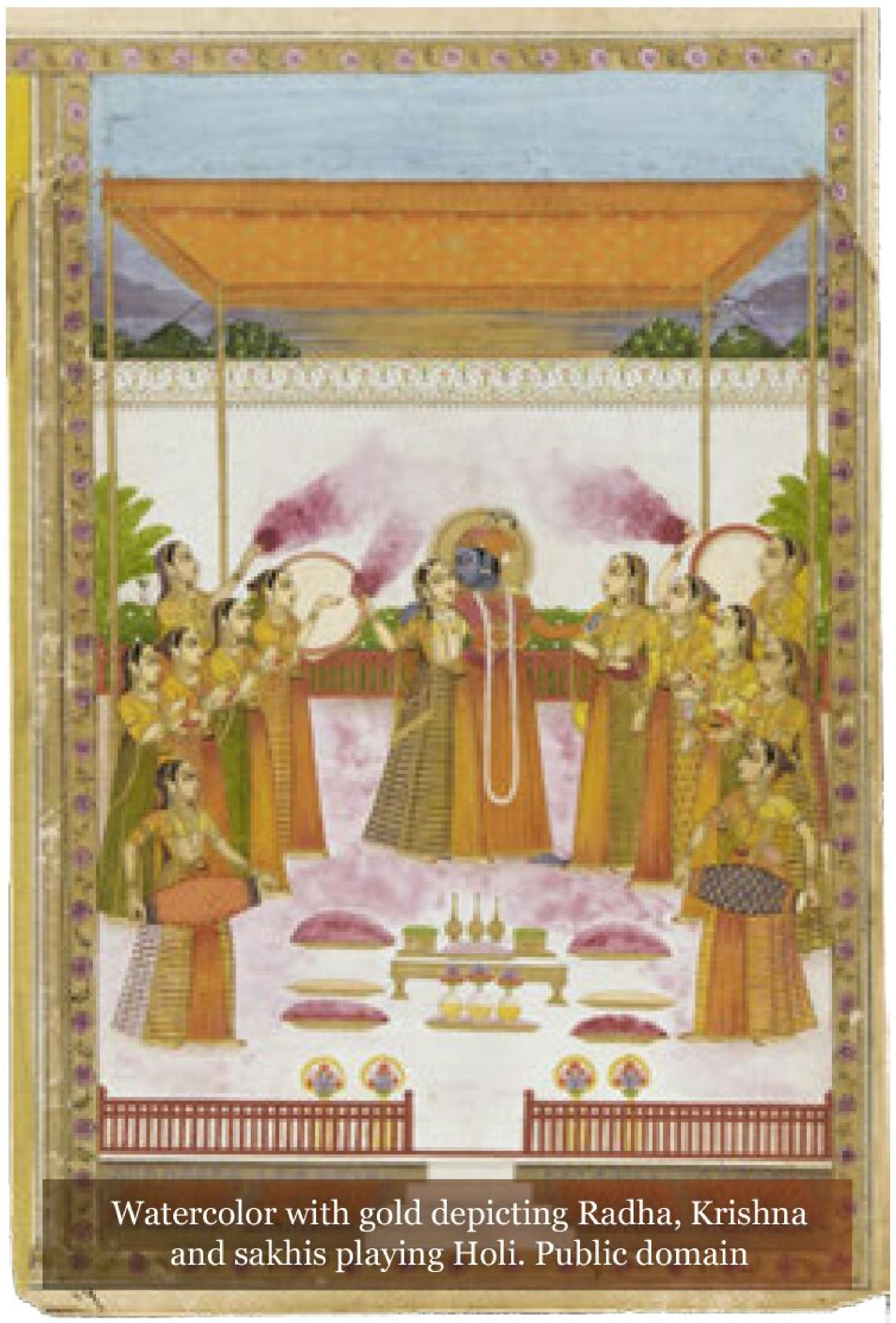
Hiranyakashipu wielding a mace against Narasimha. Public domain

The Legend of the Demon King: Good Always Triumphs Over Evil

The Holi festival was originally celebrated within a Hindu context and is still observed on the day after the last full moon of Phalguna, the final month of the Hindu calendar (between late February and early March).

One legend associated with the festival is that of Prahlad and Hiranyakshyap. According to the story, there once was a powerful demon king named Hiranyakshyap. This demon king, who resided in Multan, was virtually indestructible due to a boon granted to him by Brahma.

Hiranyakshyap grew arrogant, considered himself a god, and demanded that everyone worship him. His son, Prahlad, however, was a devotee of Vishnu and refused to worship his father. Enraged, Hiranyakshyap sought the help of his sister, the demoness Holika (whose name gives us the word Holi), to eliminate Prahlad. Holika, who had a boon rendering her immune to fire, entered a pyre with Prahlad on her lap, intending to burn him alive. But Prahlad's unwavering devotion to Vishnu saved him, and the demoness was burned instead.



Watercolor with gold depicting Radha, Krishna and sakhis playing Holi. Public domain

This story is one of many associated with *Holika Dahan* (meaning "The Burning of Holika"), a ritual performed on the eve of Holi, also known as *Chhoti Holi* ("Small Holi"). During Holika Dahan, bonfires are lit to commemorate Prahlad's deliverance from his evil father and aunt. In many parts of India, an effigy of Holika is also burned on the fire. Thus, the Holika Dahan is a reminder that good always triumphs over evil.

Why Do People Throw Colors at Holi? Thank Krishna and Radha

Throwing colored powders during *Rangwali Holi*, the second day of Holi, is rooted in a beloved Hindu legend involving Krishna, an avatar of Vishnu. Krishna felt embarrassed by his dark blue skin and feared that Radha, the *gopi* (cowherd girl) he loved, would not accept him. His mother suggested that he color Radha's face any shade he liked. Delighted, Krishna playfully applied color to Radha and the other gopis, a prank that later became central to Holi celebrations.

Radha and Krishna eventually became a couple, and throwing *gulal* (colored powders) during Holi celebrates their immortal love. This association has led some to compare Holi to Valentine's Day. In Vrindavan and Mathura, two cities closely tied to Krishna, Holi festivities extend over a period of 16 days. For the rest of the world, however, Holi ends at noon. After cleaning up, people take a bath and relax for the rest of the day. In the evening, they visit friends and family, and exchange sweets, symbolizing forgiveness and a fresh start. ■

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The Significance of Egypt's Heb-Sed Festival

BY JESSICA NADEAU

As the morning sun rose over the Egyptian landscape, the royal procession gathered for a momentous occasion: the Heb-Sed Festival. This celebration reaffirmed the pharaoh's strength, divine right to rule, and unbroken reign over Upper and Lower Egypt. After 30 years of steady rule, the pharaoh would undergo rituals that honored his endurance and symbolized the eternal vitality of Egypt itself.

The festivities began as attendants helped the pharaoh into his ceremonial garb—a short kilt, finely crafted and adorned with the tail of the Apis bull. Named for the god Apis, the tail symbolized physical strength and monarchal rule. The kilt, a remnant of ceremonial robes once made from animal skins, reminded all of the pharaoh's connection to sacred animals and his dominion over both nature and Egypt.

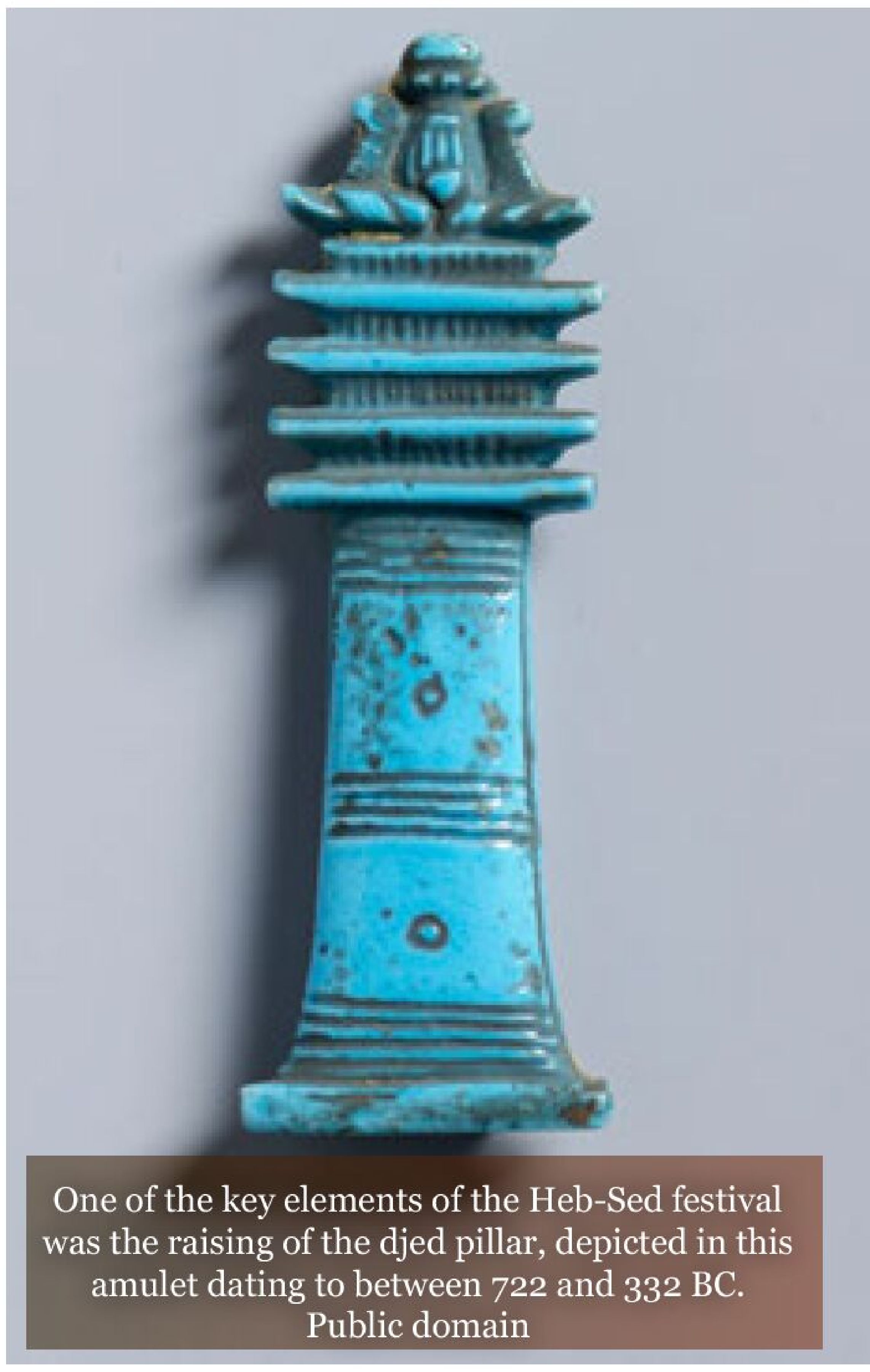
Priests and their assistants would then prepare altars and offerings for the gods. The Pharaoh knew that before any display of power or physical feats could begin, the gods must be honored. These offerings were for the gods who watched over Egypt whose favor was essential for the prosperity of the land. Saying prayers and performing the necessary rituals before sacred statues, the Pharaoh ensured divine favor.

Robert Anto/AdobeStock

Once the offerings were made, it was time for the crowning. First, the white crown of Upper Egypt was placed upon his head, a symbol of the south and the Upper Nile. Then, the red crown of Lower Egypt in the north, land of the fertile delta. These two crowns, worn together, signified the unification of Egypt that had been achieved by the first true king, Narmer (circa 2900 to 3100 BC), who is often equated with the legendary Menes.

Poised and ready, the pharaoh prepared for the most significant part of the festival: the race. The Heb-Sed court stretched into a long, rectangular space marked with boundary stones

> The Heb-Sed festival—named after the god Wepwawet, or Sed—was one of ancient Egypt's oldest and most significant celebrations, akin to a jubilee. Typically held after 30 years of reign and repeated every three to four years thereafter, the festival's primary purpose was to reaffirm the ruler's right to govern.

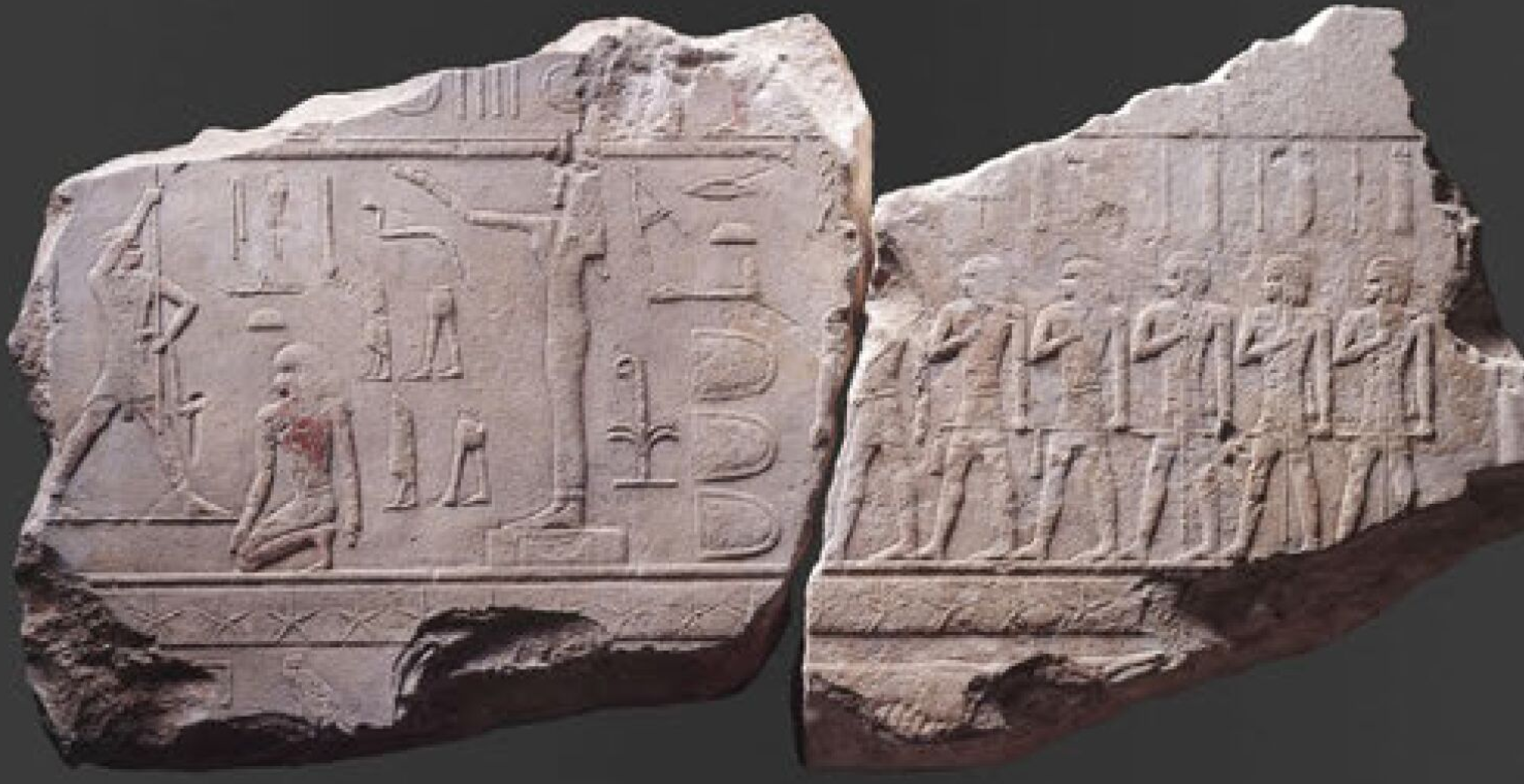

One of the key elements of the Heb-Sed festival was the raising of the djed pillar, depicted in this amulet dating to between 722 and 332 BC. Public domain

representing the limits of his kingdom. At the signal, he would begin his ritual run, moving from one marker to the next four times over. The crowd watched in awe as the pharaoh, in full stride, demonstrated his fitness to reign and his ability to wage war on his enemies.

After the run, the pharaoh was carried through the streets in a procession, visiting the temples of the gods of Upper and Lower Egypt. There, he offered additional prayers and received blessings to ensure the uninterrupted continuation of his rule. The people celebrated his grand accomplishment, as well as Egypt's future prosperity and resilience under his enduring power.

The Heb-Sed festival—named after the god Wepwawet, or Sed—was one of ancient Egypt's oldest and most significant celebrations, akin to a jubilee. Typically held after 30 years of reign and repeated every three to four years thereafter, the festival's primary purpose was to reaffirm the ruler's right to govern. Though its origins can be traced to the Early Dynastic Period, some scholars suggest the festival replaced an older custom in which a king no longer capable of ruling was ritually killed. If so, the Heb-Sed offered a way to rejuvenate a ruler's powers without such drastic measures.

The first detailed depictions of the Heb-Sed appeared during the reign of King Djoser (circa 2670 BC). His pyramid complex at Ṣaqqārah includes reliefs showing the king running between the boundary stones of the Heb-Sed court. Interestingly, marker stones within his mortuary complex indicate that the king's influence would continue


Fragment of a relief, believed to date back to the reign of Snefru (circa 2575–2551 BC), depicting rituals associated with Heb-Sed celebrations. Public domain

Temple relief of Seti I at Abydos in Upper Egypt. Public domain

Depiction of King Djoser performing Heb-Sed rituals at Saqqarah. Soutekh67 / CC BY-SA 4.0

into the afterlife, underscoring the ritual's significance in life and its perpetuation in death.

Beyond the physical challenges, the Heb-Sed was rich in spiritual meaning. One of the key elements of the festival was the raising of the djed pillar—a bovine spine or phallic-like symbol—associated with Osiris, as well as the stability and strength of the king. The Heb-Sed ritual served as a rebirth for the ruler, reinforcing his authority and reminding the people of his power.

The Heb-Sed festival reached its height during the New Kingdom, particularly under pharaohs such as Amenhotep III (circa 1390 to 1353 BC) and Ramesses II (circa 1279 to 1213 BC). These rulers celebrated the festival with unparalleled

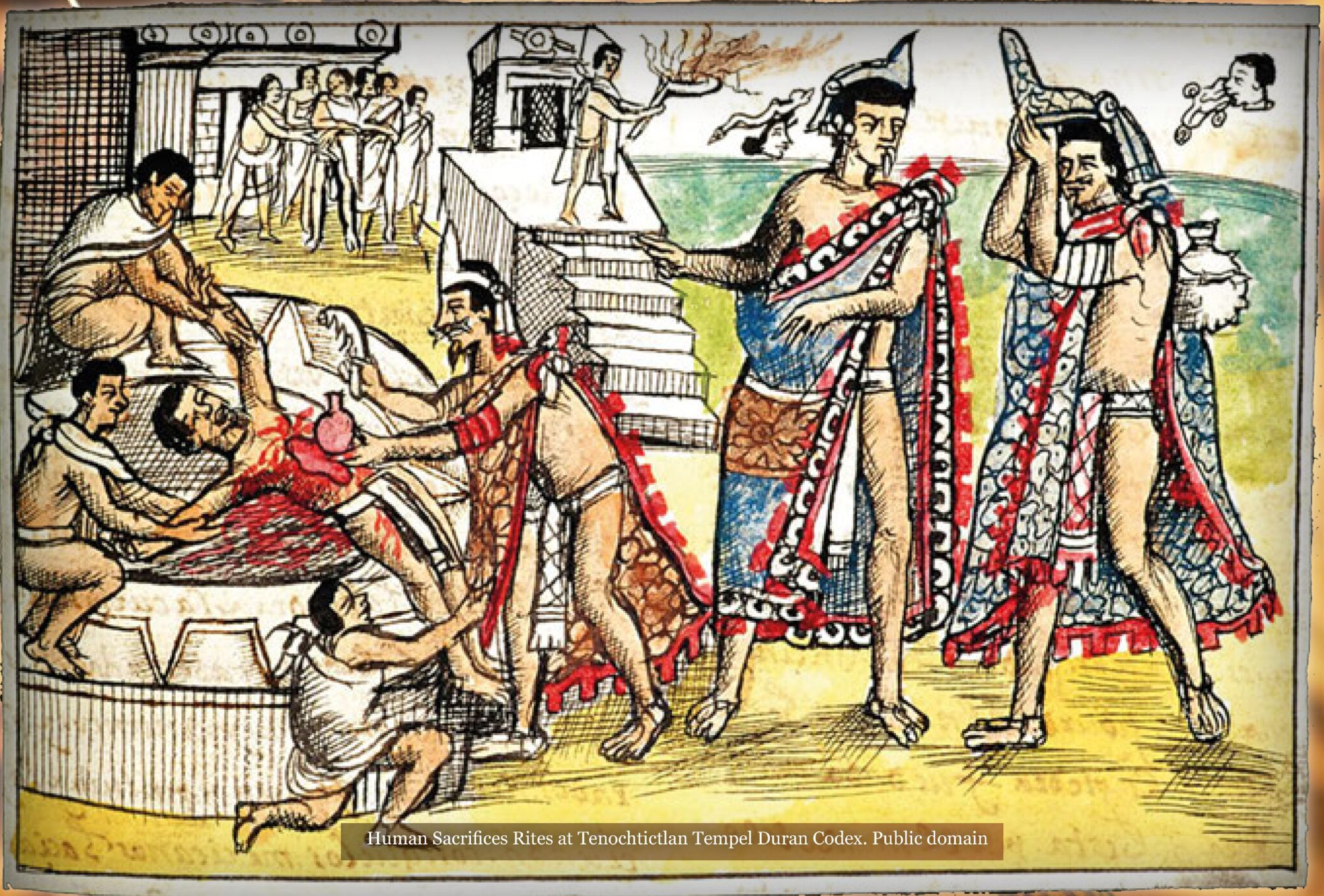
Arnada/AdobeStock

The Heb-Sed ritual served as a rebirth for the ruler, reinforcing his authority and reminding the people of his power.

grandeur. Amenhotep III's Heb-Sed involved the construction of grand temples and colossal statues, with the main celebration taking place at Kom el-Hettan, the Sun Temple of Amenhotep III on the western bank of the Nile.

While many pharaohs followed the tradition of celebrating the Heb-Sed after 30 years, some deviated from the norm. Ramesses II held an unprecedented 14 Heb-Sed festivals during his reign. Akhenaten (circa 1353 to 1336 BC) and the famous female pharaoh Hatshepsut (circa 1479 to 1458 BC) also did not adhere to the traditional 30-year timeframe. Akhenaten, who introduced significant religious reforms, chose to celebrate his first Heb-Sed early in his reign, possibly to consolidate his power against the influential priesthood of Amun. Hatshepsut celebrated her Heb-Sed on the 30th anniversary of her father's death.

Even during the later periods of Egypt, the Heb-Sed festival continued. Osorkon II (874 to 850 BC) celebrated his own Heb-Sed at Bubastis, building a massive temple with a red granite gateway decorated with reliefs of the jubilee. As a steadfast cornerstone of the Egyptian monarchy and a prominent cultural and religious institution, the Heb-Sed festival defined Egypt's kingship for millennia, leaving a legendary mark on the kingdom's history. ■



Human Sacrifices Rites at Tenochtictlan Tempel Duran Codex. Public domain

Human Sacrifice in Ancient Aztec Festivals and Celebrations

SEPARATING FACT FROM FICTION

BY NATHAN FALDE

In central Mexico from the 14th through the 16th centuries, the Aztecs built a society known for its rich culture, complex social structure, impressive architectural feats, and apparent obsession with human sacrifice. The latter has given the Aztecs a level of notoriety still associated with them today, long after their once-thriving culture faded into historical memory.

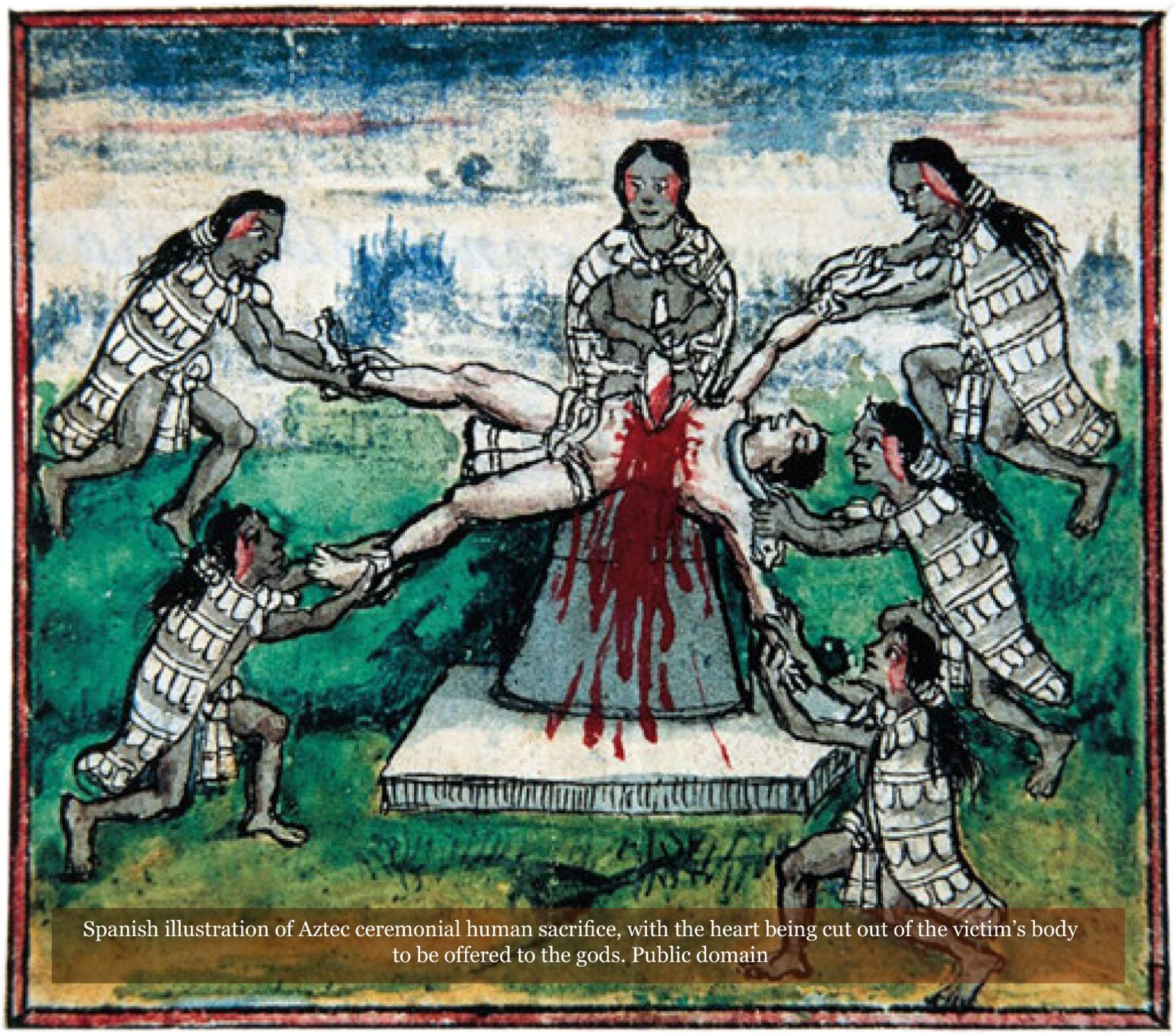
There is no doubt that the Aztecs practiced human sacrifice, and on a relatively large scale. But the truth about their relationship to this taboo subject remains shrouded in mystery. As chilling and alien as the concept of killing humans to secure the favor of the gods may seem to modern observers, from the Aztec perspective—and from the ancient Mesoamerican perspective in general—human sacrifice was seen as essential to preserving their culture and maintaining the order of the universe.

The Aztecs didn't practice human sacrifice because they were bloodthirsty or motivated to seek revenge against their enemies. They practiced it because they believed their deities required it and feared they would be doomed to destruction if they defied their gods' wishes.

History is Written by the Victors

There is an old maxim that says, "History is written by the victors." This reflects the distortions that can occur when one side in a conflict defines its opponents, a concept clearly relevant to understanding the Aztecs.

Lila Patel/AdobeStock



Spanish illustration of Aztec ceremonial human sacrifice, with the heart being cut out of the victim's body to be offered to the gods. Public domain

The stories detailing their barbaric love of human sacrifice came from the Spanish conquistadors, who had a vested interest in portraying the Aztecs—and other Mesoamericans—in the worst light possible to legitimize their ruthless desecration of cultures and the murder and enslavement of people. This makes it virtually certain that the Spanish distorted the truth, exaggerating the frequency and scale of Aztec human sacrifices.

Human sacrifice was a staple of Aztec society and central to their religious beliefs, with large numbers of victims killed during ceremonies in the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán (modern-day Mexico City). This is evident from archaeological finds, including significant quantities of damaged skeletal remains, as well as tools, weapons, and ceremonial artifacts used in sacrificial rituals.

However, this activity was neither purposeless nor indiscriminate. It was carried out to appease the gods, almost exclusively during religious festivals, celebrations, and rituals organized to honor them.

> From the Aztec perspective—and from the ancient Mesoamerican perspective in general—human sacrifice was seen as essential to preserving their culture and maintaining the order of the universe.

Arthur/AdobeStock

Sacrificial victims were not considered inferior or unworthy but were instead seen as fortunate, given the opportunity to leave the earthly plane and live in heavenly realms with the deities the Aztec people worshipped. While captives taken during warfare were often chosen as victims, in some instances Aztec warriors, political leaders, or citizens volunteered to die for what they believed was the good of their people.

Sacrifices were most often made to the sun god Huitzilopochtli, who was believed to require human hearts to animate the sun's eternal journey across the sky, and Tlaloc, the rain god, who was said to need human souls to continue blessing the land and making it fertile. It was the living energy of human beings that sustained these gods, the Aztecs thought, and they saw it as their duty to meet the demands of the gods to ensure their own prosperity and to prevent reality from descending into chaos.

The True Context of Aztec Human Sacrifice Revealed

Aztec culture was deeply religious, and its leaders were believed to be the gods' chosen emissaries on Earth. These leaders acted as intermediaries between the people and their ultimate rulers. When they ordered sacrifices, it was thought those requests came directly from the deities themselves. Warriors were trained to capture and imprison men during battle instead of killing them outright, to ensure their life energy wasn't wasted but could instead be offered to the gods on a sacrificial altar.

For the Aztecs, human sacrifice was not merely a ritual but a cornerstone of public life and religious expression. Performed during major events and celebrations, these sacrifices were seen as essential acts of devotion. It is clear that they did so primarily for religious reasons, with those offered to the gods regarded as fulfilling a sacred and honorable purpose. ■

Snapshotfreddy/AdobeStock

DRUNK BURN

AND OTHER ICONIC CELE

BY ROBBIE MITCHELL

Sometimes, people just need to let their hair down. Throughout history, celebrations have offered a chance to escape the daily grind and honor extraordinary milestones. From Egypt's Festival of Drunkenness to Alexander the Great's infamous debauchery at Persepolis, history is filled with iconic gatherings that reflect the passions, power, and priorities of their time. Whether marking divine intervention, military conquest, or sheer extravagance, these legendary parties reveal as much about the cultures that hosted them as they do about humanity's enduring love for celebration.

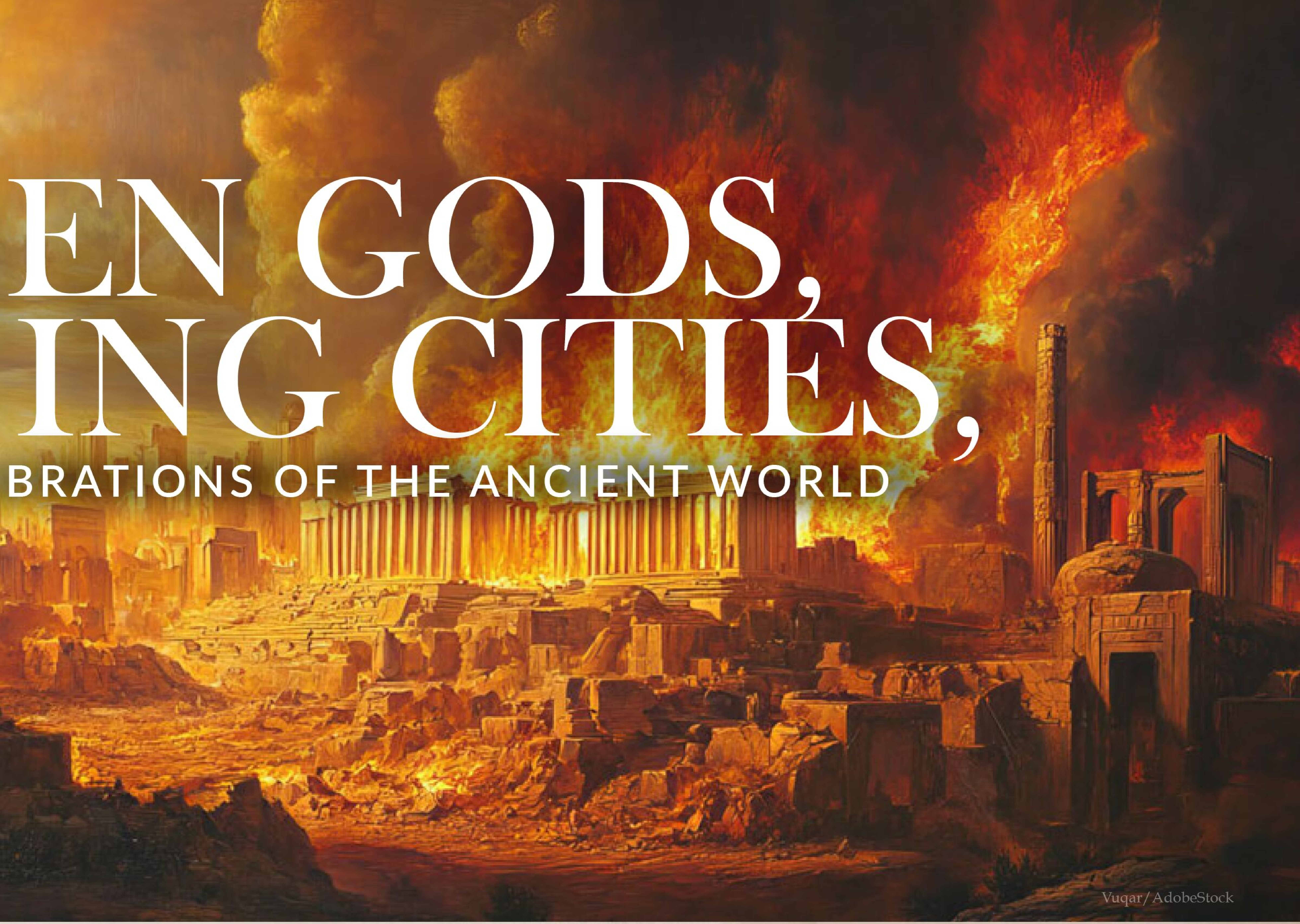
Egypt's Festival of Drunkenness

These days, religion tends to have a bit of a stuffy image. Some religions ban the consumption of alcohol outright, and those that don't often take a dim view of overindulgence. This wasn't always the case and worshippers of ancient times really knew how to party.

Tomb of Ramesses V and Ramesses VI, Valley of the Kings, Luxor, Egypt. Public domain

The Festival of Drunkenness dates back to the 15th century BC and was an important religious celebration. According to Egyptian mythology, the sun god Ra prevented mankind's destruction using alcohol. Hathor, another Egyptian god, was planning to devour all human life on Earth, but Ra stopped her by tricking her into drinking 7,000 jars of beer dyed red to look like blood.

As anyone who has ever drunk one too many beers will know, plans have a habit of going out the window when the buzz kicks in. This was definitely true for Hathor, who



EN GODS,
ING CITIES,
BRATIONS OF THE ANCIENT WORLD

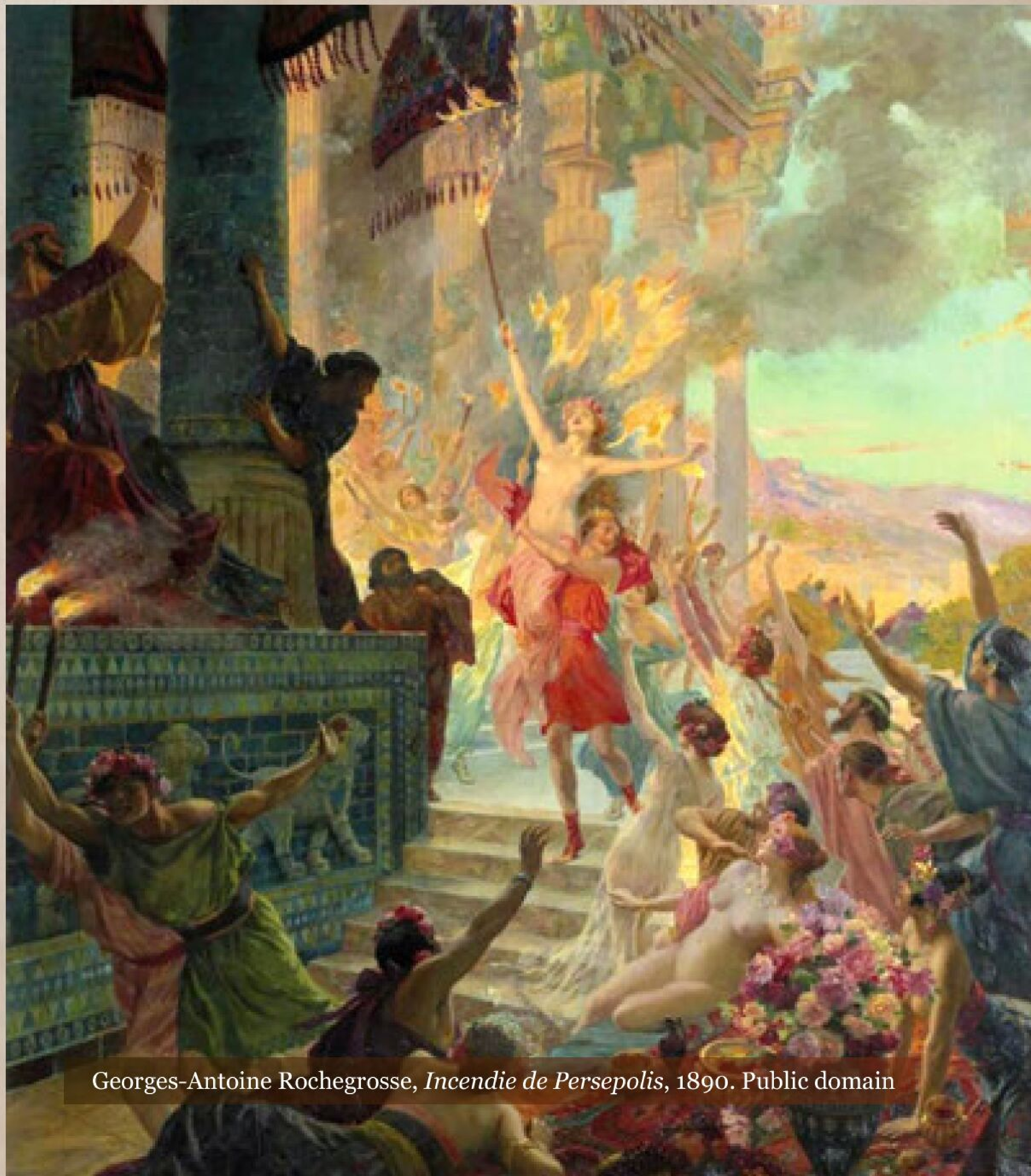
Vuqar/AdobeStock

promptly passed out and forgot all about her world-ending plans.

To celebrate this event, the Egyptians gathered on the 20th day of Thoth every year and consumed vast amounts of alcohol. The aim was to copy Hathor and pass out. Since Hathor was also the goddess of love and fertility, many Egyptians saw this as a great chance to engage in orgies and other revelries in her name. All hail Hathor!

Alexander the Great and the Burning of Persepolis

Some of the greatest parties in history have been held to celebrate a major victory. Alexander the Great's party at Persepolis is a prime example of what happens when one of these parties gets a little out of hand. A cross between a party and a purge, this party culminated in murder, rape, and a general level of drunkenness that was pretty much unheard of. Persepolis was left looted and its grand Royal Palace was torched to a crisp.



Georges-Antoine Rochegrosse, *Incendie de Persepolis*, 1890. Public domain

Serhii / AdobeStock

While the party itself happened in 331 BC, we must look back to 480 BC for an explanation as to why the party got so out of hand. In 480 BC the city of Athens burned to the ground following the Persian Emperor Xerxes's defeat of the Greeks at the Battle of Thermopylae.

The cause of the great fire of Athens is still debated to this day. When the Persians marched on Athens, they found it completely deserted and destroyed. Maybe the fire started as an accident while the Greeks were fleeing. Maybe the Greeks set the fire on purpose to deprive the Persians of supplies. Or maybe Xerxes ordered the burning in a fit of rage after discovering everything worth looting was already gone.

What we do know is that for a very long time Greek propaganda blamed the Persians for the burning of their greatest city.

Robert Hubert, *The Fire of Rome, 18 July 64 AD*. Public domain

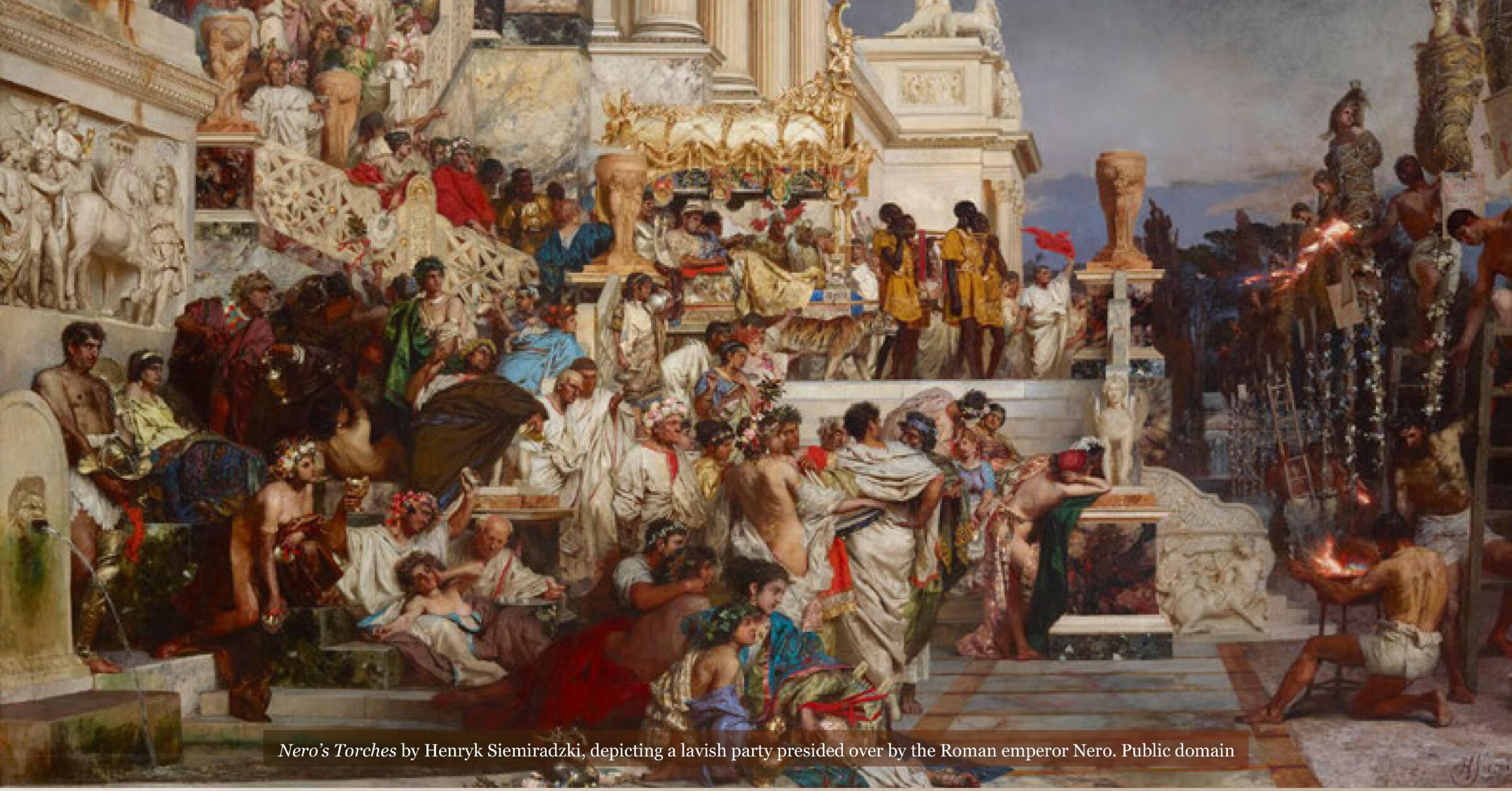
By the time Alexander was king, the Greeks were ready for some serious payback. After years of brutal battles, Alexander the Great defeated the Achaemenid Persian Empire in 330 BC following his victory at the Battle of Gaugamela. His first order of business was to march to the Persian capital, Persepolis, and get looting.

The people of Persepolis didn't surrender easily and there was a massive battle at the Persian Gate. The Persian defenders had the advantage, and although the Greeks ultimately won, their losses were heavy. Alexander's men were far from home and had been fighting almost non-stop for five years. Aware that they needed to blow off steam to avoid mutiny, Alexander gave them permission to butcher the local men, gang-rape and enslave the women, loot everything that wasn't nailed down, and drink whatever they could find.

The debauched frenzy culminated with Alexander ordering that the city's citadel, at the center of which was the palace, be burnt down. Although the building itself was stone, the foundations were made of wood. After its collapse, all that was left were 40 stone pillars. At this legendary party, they quite literally burned the house down.

The Ultimate Party Pad at Nero's Golden House

Historically, ancient Roman emperors have had a reputation for decadence and gluttony. Of all the various emperors, no one knew how to party quite like Nero. He had the ultimate playboy mansion built in the center of



Nero's Torches by Henryk Siemiradzki, depicting a lavish party presided over by the Roman emperor Nero. Public domain

Rome: the *Domus Aurea*, or "Golden House."

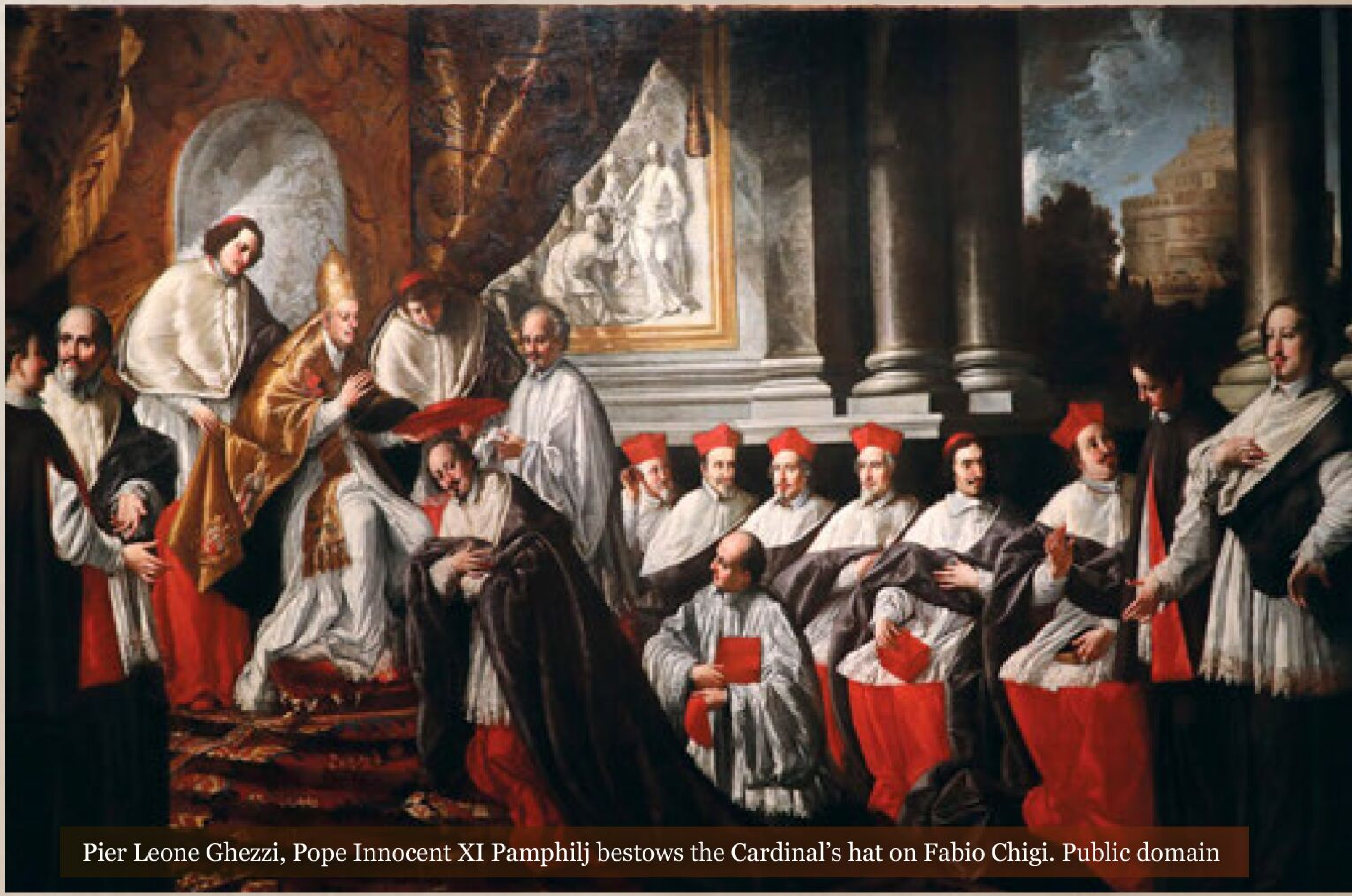
While it's hard to get one's head around just how big Nero's mansion and its grounds were, it is estimated the estate itself was anywhere from 100 to 300 acres in size, reaching across the Palatine, Caelian, and Esquiline Hills. It featured an artificial lake, farmland, and vast gardens, where Nero enjoyed having Christians burnt at the stake.

The estate's crown jewel was the *Domus*, a sprawling mansion with over 300 rooms and a vast dome at its center. The exterior walls were gold-plated, while the interior was decorated with marble, ivory, and precious gems. It was here that Nero held his parties.

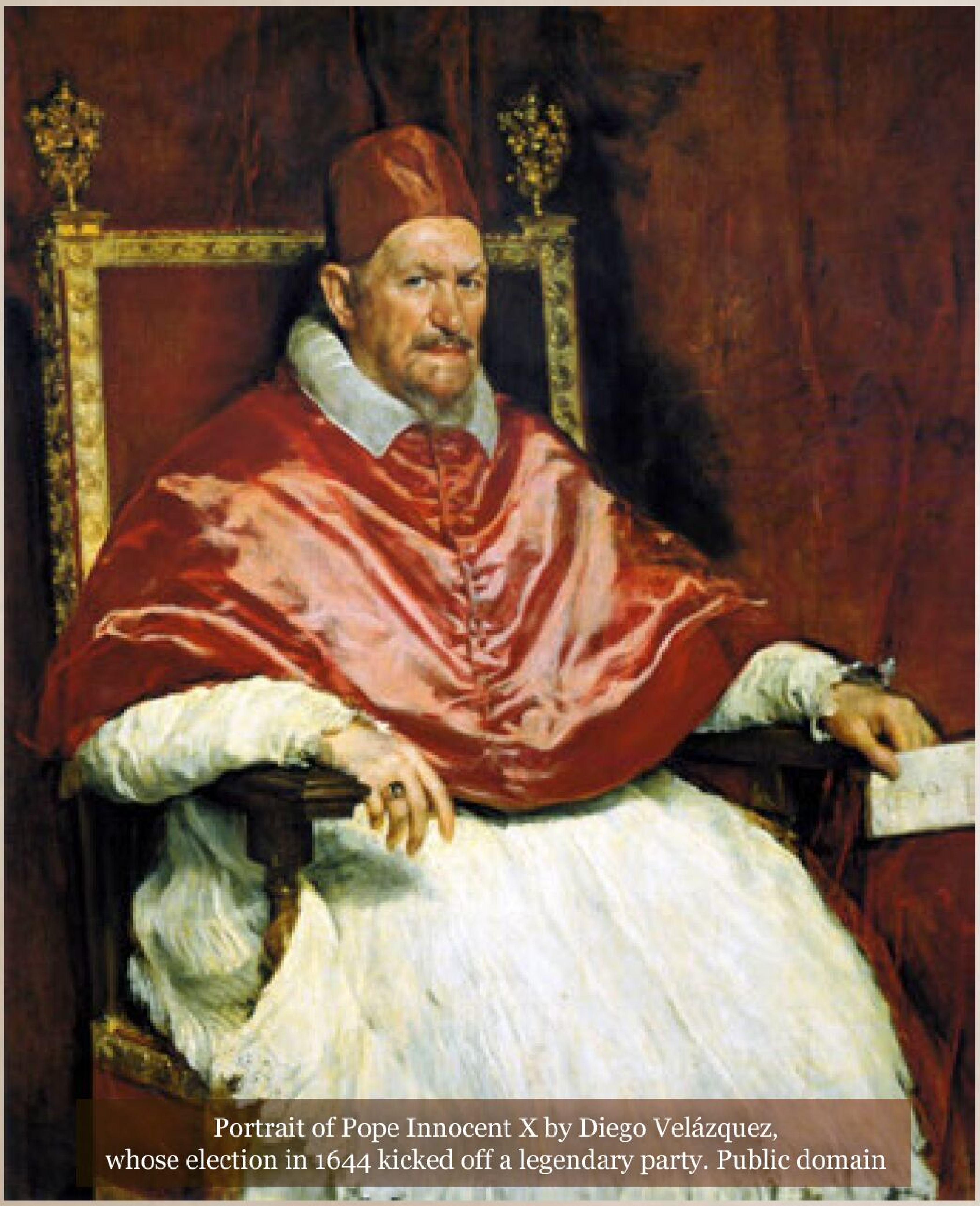
Few records exist of specific parties held at the palace, likely because such parties were held every night. But, while Rome's great and good partied the night away with their emperor, the people of Rome were starving. Legend has it that the doors to his dining room were locked and that guests were only allowed to exit if they were going to make themselves vomit in order to keep eating. During and after the feasts, drunken orgies were held where it is said Nero would cover himself with the skin of a wild animal and ravage his guests like an untamed beast. No one was allowed to leave until Nero said the party was over.

Celebrating the End of the Papal Conclaves of 1664 and 1667

Whenever a pope dies, a conclave is held where the various Catholic cardinals assemble to elect the next pontiff. Italy, historically a



Pier Leone Ghezzi, Pope Innocent XI Pamphilj bestows the Cardinal's hat on Fabio Chigi. Public domain


Portrait of Pope Innocent X by Diego Velázquez, whose election in 1644 kicked off a legendary party. Public domain

very Catholic country with close ties to the Roman Catholic Church, enters a period of mourning every time a pope dies. But when the conclave takes too long, the entire country gets a little impatient.

When Pope Urban VIII died in 1644, the resulting conclave lasted from August 9 to September 15 of the same year. The reason for the delay was that two of the cardinals, Antonio and Francesco Barberini, who had been appointed by Urban via nepotism, were incapable of agreeing on anything, bickering like an old married couple.

It took bribes from France and Spain to get the two men to agree, leading to Giovanni Battista Pamphili's election as the new Pope. He took the name Innocent X, which proved ironic considering that the whole of Rome erupted into a party unlike anything seen in centuries.

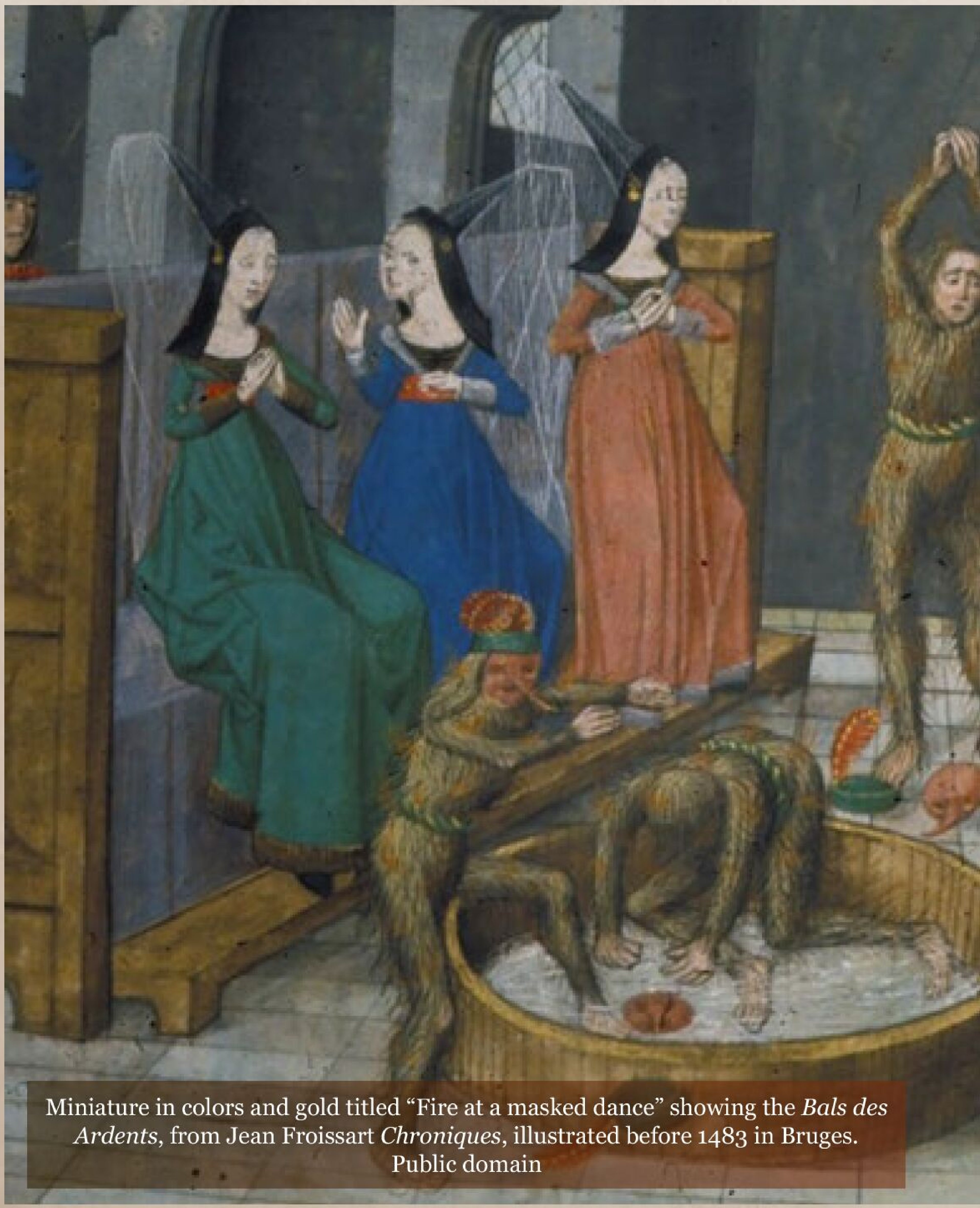
Innocent X wasn't around for long, and by 1655 another conclave had to be held from January through to April. The resulting celebrations weren't quite as boisterous, perhaps because people were still recovering from the last ones.

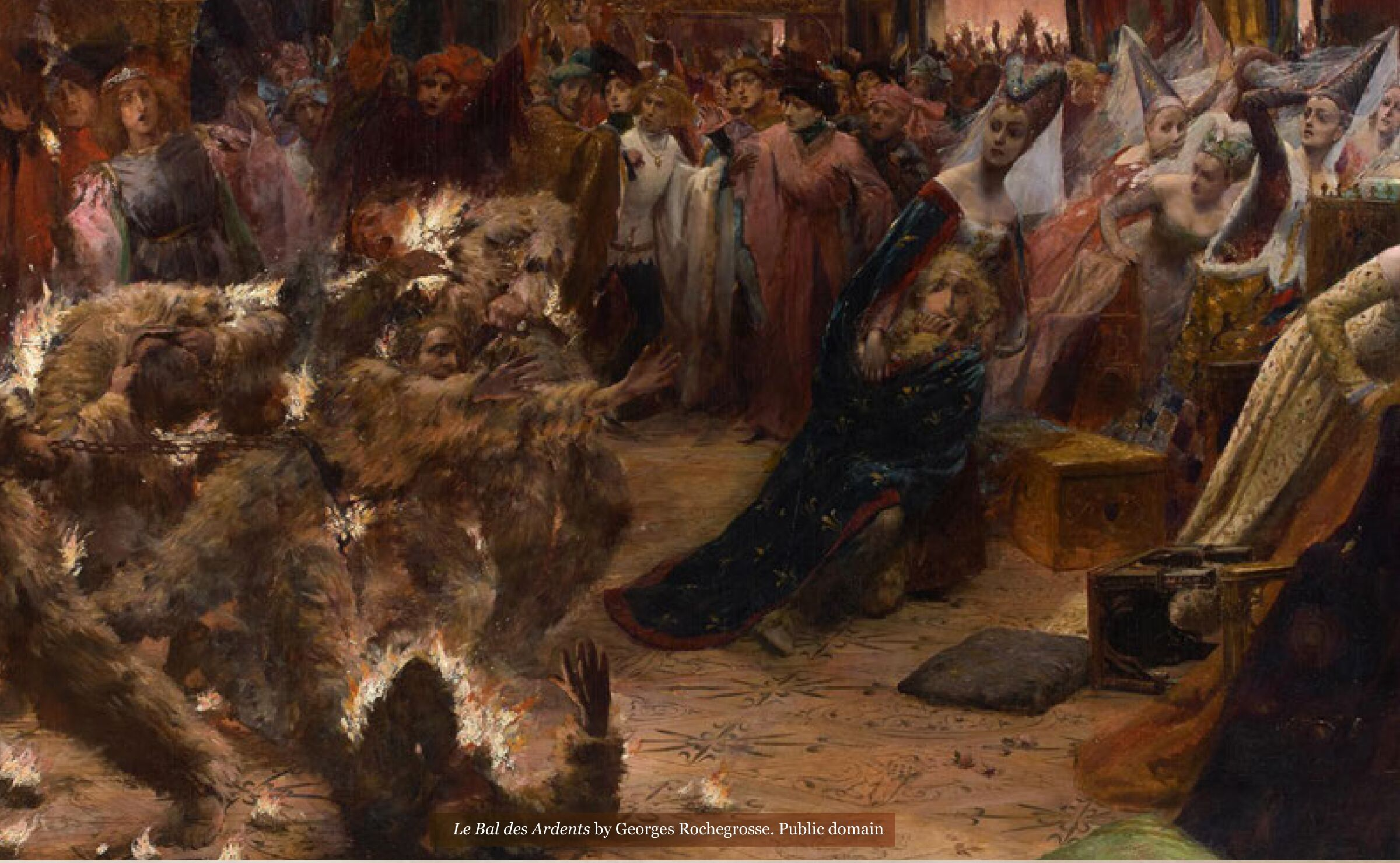
In 1667, yet another conclave was held. This one was much shorter, lasting only 18 days. Still, it was long enough for Rome's residents to justify a massive celebration held at *La Fontana dei Leoni* (the Lion's Fountain) at the foot of the Cordonata in Piazza d'Aracoeli.

For anyone unfamiliar with Rome, the Cordonata is a giant staircase with a lion made of black basalt on either side. Normally these lions spew water into a huge vase beneath. But on the days after the 1644 and 1667 conclaves, the water was replaced with wine and given to partygoers free of charge. Thousands flocked to the area to dip their goblets in the wine and get merry.

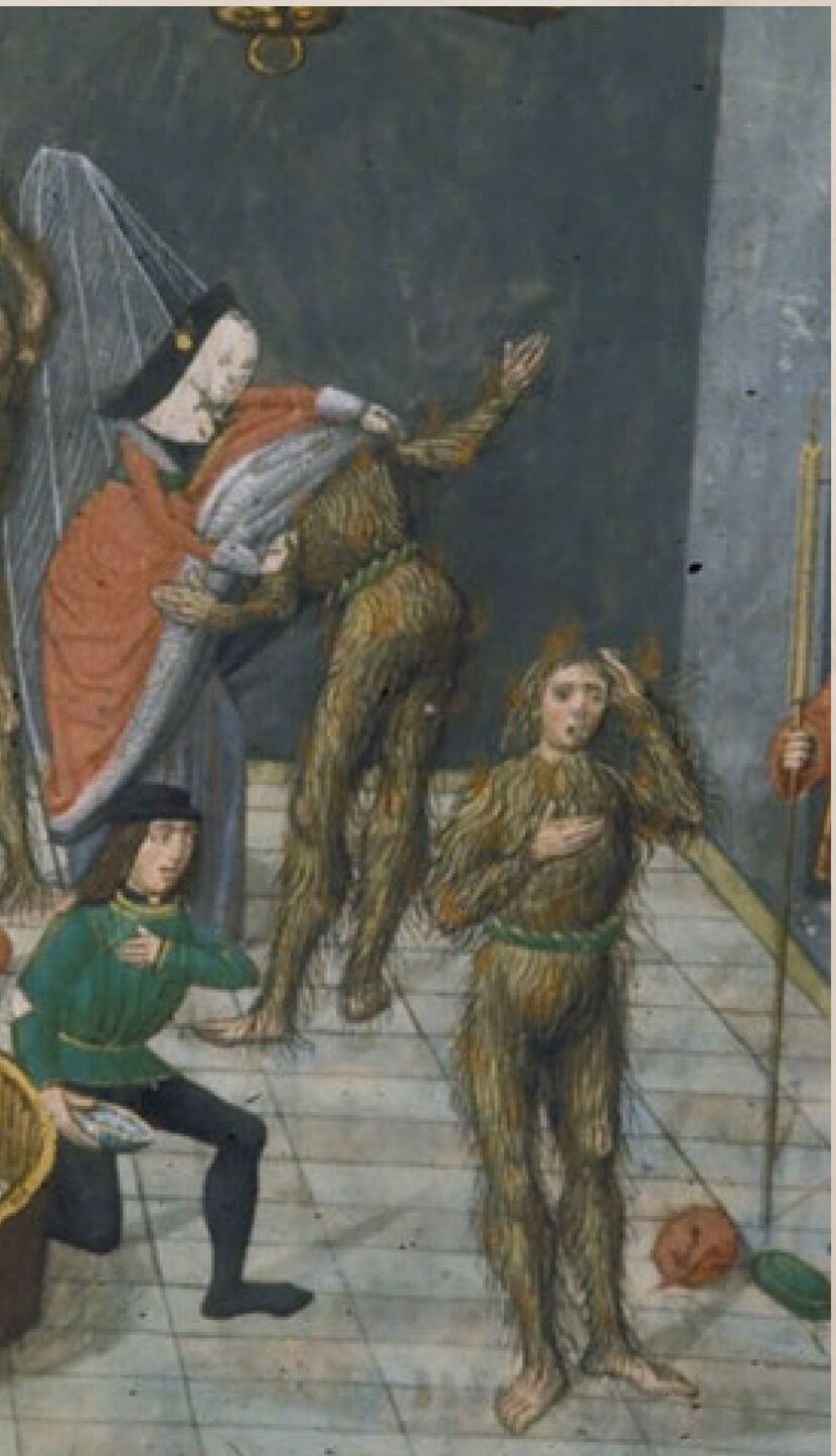
Charles VI and the Ball of the Burning Men

The Ball of the Burning Men, or *Bal des Ardents*, was a masquerade ball held on the January 28, 1393, in Paris. The ball was organized by King Charles VI's wife, Isabeau of Bavaria, to celebrate the remarriage of one of her ladies-in-waiting—or at least, that was what Charles was told. In reality, the ball was meant to entertain and distract the French king, who had suffered from a bout of insanity the previous summer.


Miniature in colors and gold titled "Fire at a masked dance" showing the *Bals des Ardents*, from Jean Froissart *Chroniques*, illustrated before 1483 in Bruges. Public domain



Le Bal des Ardents by Georges Rochegrosse. Public domain



The centerpiece of the ball was a *charivari*, a dance performed by knights dressed as wild men. The knights were soaked in pitch to make them look hairy, and the guests were supposed to guess who was hiding behind the disguises.

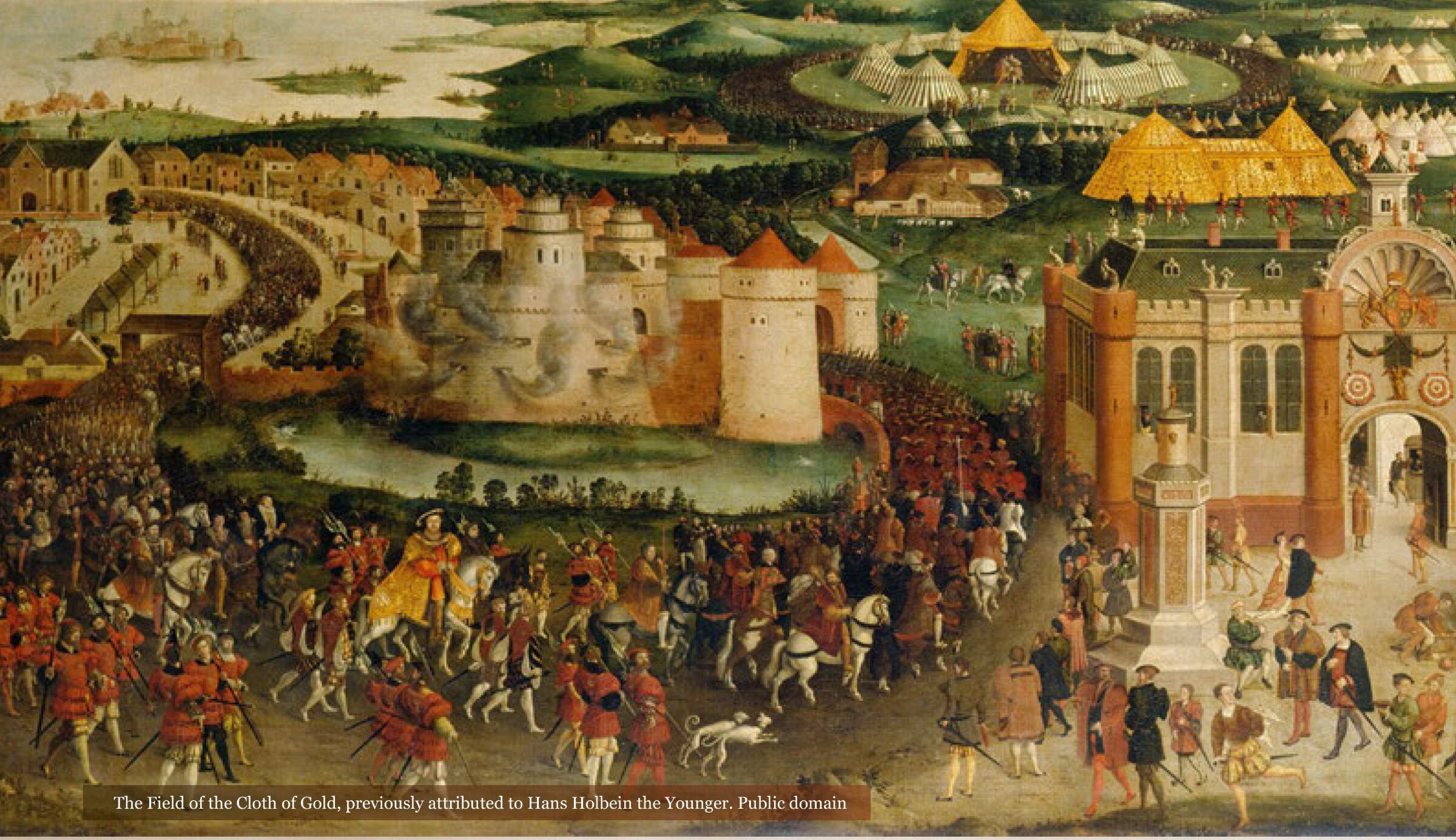
Since pitch is highly flammable, candles and torches were banned from the dance room. Unfortunately, the king's brother, the Duc d'Orleans, never got the memo and he drunkenly stumbled into the room carrying a torch, bumping into one of the dancers.

The dancer caught fire and from there the ensuing blaze spread quickly. Four of the dancers burned to death. One person who almost died in the flames was Charles himself, who unbeknownst to most of the revelers was one of the dancers. The French were outraged, seeing the party as a sign of royal decadence getting out of hand. The entire court, including Charles and his drunken brother, was forced to offer penance for the disastrous debacle.

France Vs England at the Field of the Cloth of Gold

To say that France and England haven't always gotten along would be an understatement. Both countries have spent majority of their respective histories at war with each other. Even during rare times of peace, the two countries struggle to get along, hampered by centuries-old rivalry.

The Field of the Cloth of Gold is a prime example of what happens when France and England try to get along. Held in 1520 over 17 days, from June 7 to June 24, it was a rare period of peace



The Field of the Cloth of Gold, previously attributed to Hans Holbein the Younger. Public domain

during which both kings decided to celebrate with a massive party.

In reality, however, it was a chance for the two kings to try and outdo each other. The event took its name from the massive amount of expensive cloth both countries used to try to display their wealth and power. Huge tents were set up to house extravagant banquets, jousting tournaments, and parties. Over 216,000 gallons of wine were consumed, and 2,000 sheep were eaten.

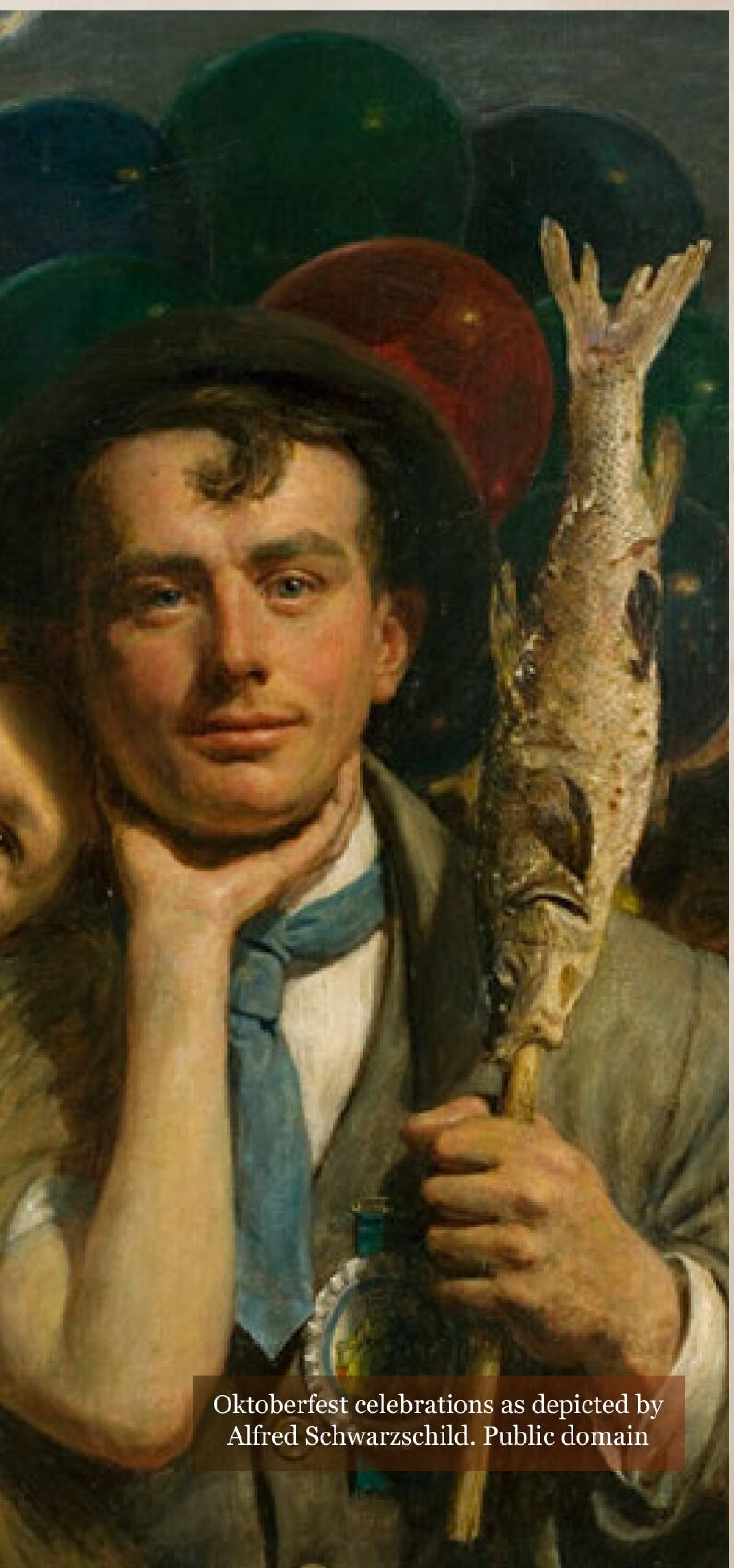
Anulak/AdobeStock

The event was exorbitantly expensive and, diplomatically speaking, a failure, since both kings had massive, and sensitive, egos. A highlight of the event was meant to be a wrestling match between King Henry VIII of England and King Francis I of France, but things are said to have gone sour after Henry's defeat.

Admiral Edward Russell's Cocktail Party

The English have long held a reputation for enjoying a good drink, and throughout history they have backed this up with deeds. A classic example is Admiral Edward Russell's cocktail party, held in the garden of his Covent Garden home in 1664.

Parties like this weren't just about having a good time—they were about making a name for oneself. Russell decided the best way to impress his guests was to have



Oktoberfest celebrations as depicted by Alfred Schwarzschild. Public domain

his garden's fountain drained and refilled with 250 gallons of brandy, 125 gallons of Malaga wine, 1,400 pounds of sugar, 2,500 lemons, and 5 pounds of nutmeg. It was, by all accounts, a very expensive and exceptionally large cocktail.

The story claims that it took Russell's guests an entire week to finish his record-breaking cocktail and that his party continued throughout. This being England, when it rained Russell had a silk canopy erected to ensure the alcohol remained undiluted (heaven forbid!).

The Original Oktoberfest

You know a party was truly successful when everyone agrees to do it all over again the following year. Oktoberfest, as we know it today, was originally held to celebrate the wedding of Bavarian Crown Prince Ludwig to Princess Therese of Sachsen-Hildburghausen in Munich in 1810. While royal weddings tend to be splendid affairs, this one was particularly extravagant and everyone in Bavaria was invited. For five days, starting on October 12, 40,000 people from across Bavaria came to Munich to party.

It took months of preparations as restaurants tried to outdo each other with increasingly extravagant parties. More than 32,000 buns, 3,992 pounds of cheese, 900 pounds of mutton, and 13,000 pairs of sausages were devoured over the course of the party. Not to mention 6,000 gallons of beer!

It was such a legendary party plans were made to repeat the celebrations the following year. This time, however, it was done on an even bigger scale, lasting for 12 days instead of the original five. Thus, the annual Oktoberfest, the world's largest beer festival, was born.

The sheer scale of these historically legendary parties is truly astonishing, and the level of preparation behind them migraine-inducing. It seems our ancestors, especially the wealthy ones, truly knew how to party. But has much really changed? Throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, the world's rich and famous have thrown parties rivaling many on this list. Most of us are just never invited to them—a fact that, perhaps, isn't such a bad thing. ■

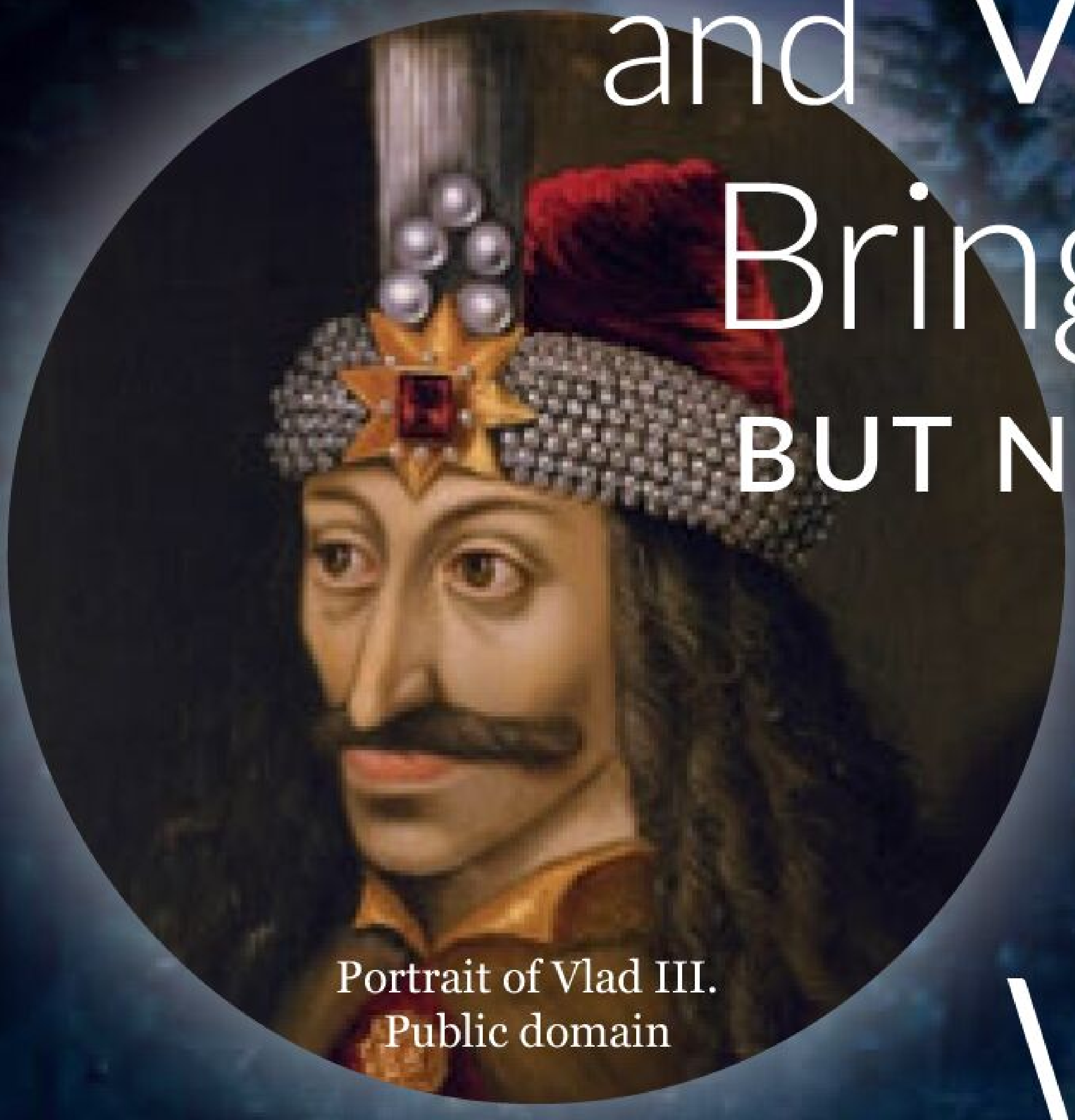
Viperagp / AdobeStock

Count DRACULA and Vlad the Impaler Bring Tourists to Romania.

BUT NOT ALL ROMANIANS ARE HAPPY

BY NATHAN FALDE

Count Dracula, as played by Bela Lugosi in the 1931 movie *Dracula*. Public domain



Portrait of Vlad III. Public domain

With the international release of the blockbuster movie *Nosferatu* at the beginning of this year, interest in vampires may be at an all-time high. This is likely to bring a new wave of tourists to the region of central Romania known as Transylvania, which is the home territory of both Nosferatu and Count Dracula, as well as the real-life villain who inspired their creation. The latter is the iron-fisted ruler Vlad Tepes Draculea (more popularly known as Vlad the Impaler), who ruled Romania with a ruthlessness that has only a few parallels in history.

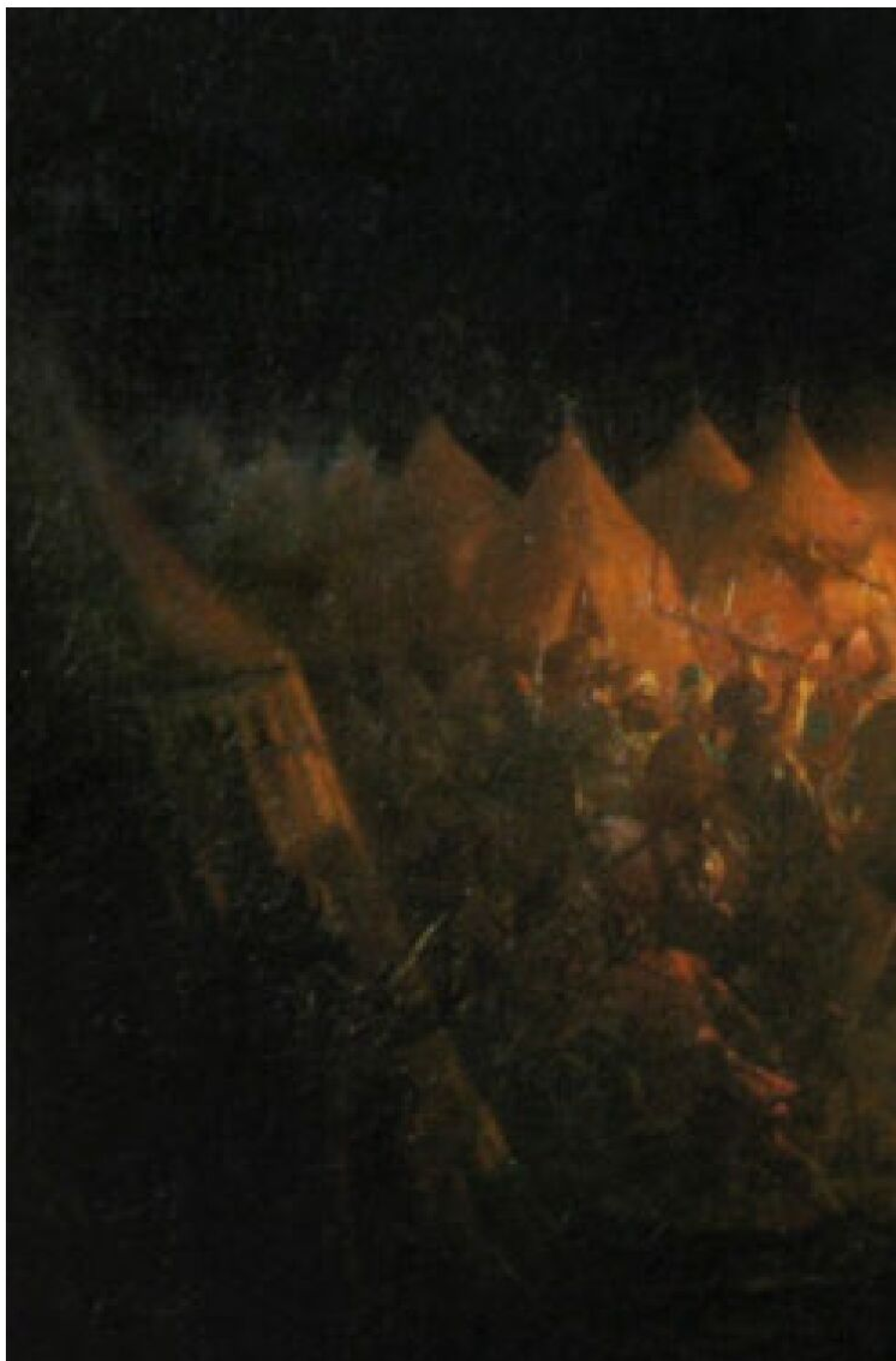
In Romania, the Dracula legend has long been a boon to the tourist economy. Many horror fans consider a trip to the dark, mysterious forests and mountain valleys of Transylvania the ultimate thrill. They imagine being stalked by Count Dracula even as they learn about the real-life figure who inspired Bram Stoker's famous vampire novel, *Dracula*, written in the late 1890s. Festivals and celebrations

Bran Castle, also known as Dracula's Castle, in Transylvania, Romania.
Kanuman / Adobe Stock

featuring Dracula- or Vlad-themed events are held in locations associated with one or both of these characters, drawing visitors from around the world.

> While private tourist companies have always been more than happy to play up the Dracula legend, and to link it to the actual (horrific) exploits of the bloodthirsty but extremely well-known Vlad the Impaler, political leaders in Romania have never been thrilled with this approach to building the country's tourism industry.

One would expect Romania's National Tourist Office to emphasize the country's connection with Count Dracula, given the character's longevity in popular culture. But this is not the case. While private tourist companies have always been more than happy to play up the Dracula legend, and to link it to the actual (horrific) exploits of the bloodthirsty but extremely well-known Vlad the Impaler, political leaders in Romania have never been thrilled with this approach to building the country's tourism industry. In fact, many have been downright hostile to this type of tourism, believing it sends the wrong message about who Romanians really



The Battle With Torches' by Theodor Aman.
It depicts the The Night Attack of Târgoviste, 1462.
Public domain

Sighisoara, Romania, birthplace of Vlad Tepes Draculea, and site of Sighisoara Medieval Festival. Kwan Ng / CC BY-SA-3.0

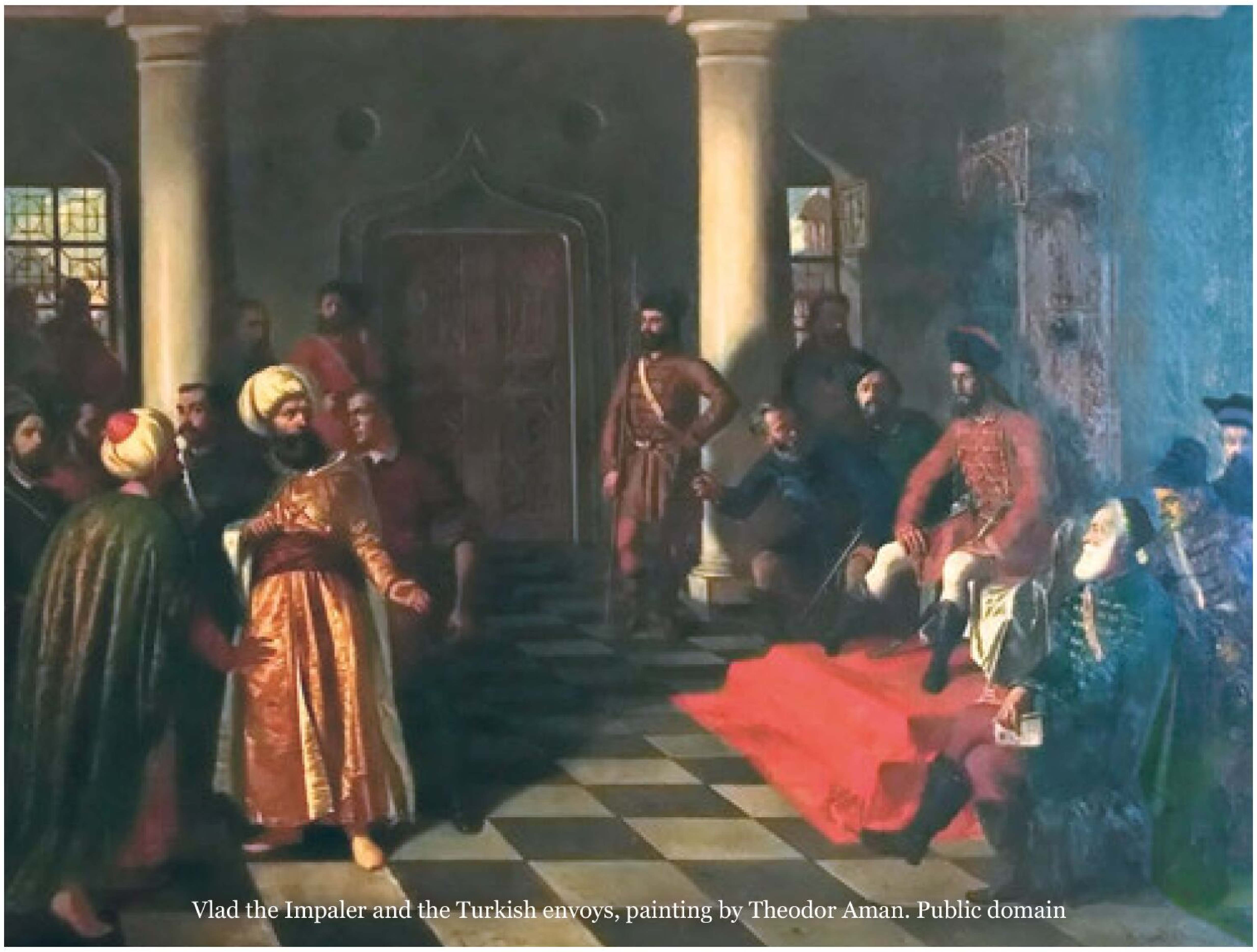
are while obscuring what they've struggled to achieve.

A Study in Contrasts: Sighisoara Medieval Festival vs. Halloween at Dracula's Castle

The ambivalence toward Vlad the Impaler and the Dracula legend in Romania is exemplified by an annual medieval festival held at the end of July in the small Transylvanian city of Sighisoara. Home to the oldest continuously occupied medieval fortress in southeastern Europe, the citadel at Sighisoara boasts nine defensive towers and other structures, all built more than 500 years ago and still in pristine condition. The city is also the birthplace of Vlad Tepes Draculea (1431), the future prince who would become Romania's most renowned historical figure.

The festival, known as the Sighisoara Medieval Festival and the largest of its kind in Transylvania, draws thousands of enthusiasts each year to explore medieval art and witness reenactments of historic battles and political events. Despite the era being celebrated and Vlad's deep historical ties to the city, his exploits are conspicuously absent from the festivities. Although the festival's website acknowledges Sighisoara as his birthplace, Vlad remains entirely excluded from its performances and events.

Nevertheless, whether they like it or not, Sighisoara does draw tourists who specifically come looking to



Vlad the Impaler and the Turkish envoys, painting by Theodor Aman. Public domain

immerse themselves in the life and times of Vlad the Impaler, which have essentially been preserved in the medieval citadel. Many of these thrill-seekers arrive in October, joining organized tours that trace the footsteps of the notorious 15th-century prince know for impaling his enemies on wooden stakes, an act calculated to intimidate political and military rivals and ensure the obedience of his subjects. While these tourists pass through Sighisoara, often asking questions that likely make some locals uneasy, their ultimate destination is typically Bran Castle, better known as Dracula's Castle. Perched atop a steep hillside in the Carpathian Mountains, this foreboding fortress was identified by Bram Stoker as the fictional home of Count Dracula in his novel. Although Vlad the Impaler never lived there, he was imprisoned in the castle for several months, lending a degree of legitimacy to its association with him.

> The ambivalence toward Vlad the Impaler and the Dracula legend in Romania is exemplified by an annual medieval festival held at the end of July in the small Transylvanian city of Sighisoara.

Czamfir/AdobeStock

Fittingly, these Vlad-and-Dracula-themed tours culminate at Bran Castle on Halloween, where visitors are invited to cap off their adventure

Yordan Rusev/AdobeStock

with Romania's most raucous Halloween celebration. Partygoers dress as vampires and embrace the fantasy of joining the ranks of the undead in the infamous fortress tied to the medieval prince whose brutality and bloodlust inspired the enduring vampire legend.

Romania's Troubled Past and Its Impact on Tourism

Dracula-themed tourism did not begin to make a significant impact on Romania's economy until the early 1990s, and there was a good reason for this. For decades, the country was ruled by the dreaded Communist dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu, whose widely despised regime kept Romania isolated as a closed society, inaccessible to international tourism. It wasn't until the Romanian Revolution of 1989 that the nation finally gained its freedom, opening the door for the development of an international tourism industry.

However, attracting foreign visitors to a relatively small and obscure Eastern European country like Romania required a compelling hook—something that would draw international tourists and their much-needed foreign currency. Thus, the Dracula-themed tourism industry was born.

From the perspective of Romania's political leaders, this was not a welcome development. They wanted tourists to visit, but they hoped they would come to learn about the positive aspects of Romanian history. Instead, visitors were drawn by their fascination with a fictional creation and the reviled ruler who inspired him—a leader who relied on terror and intimidation to impose his will on the Romanian people.

Part of the issue was that the memory of Nicolae Ceaușescu and the despised regime which was still fresh in the public consciousness. Unsurprisingly, Romania's new political leaders sought to craft an image for their country that emphasized their triumph over tyranny.

Attracting foreign visitors to a relatively small and obscure Eastern European country like Romania required a compelling hook—something that would draw international tourists and their much-needed foreign currency. Thus, the Dracula-themed tourism industry was born.

Nearly four decades have passed since the fall of the Communist regime in Romania. With the passage of time, officials may be growing more comfortable with Dracula-themed—and Vlad-the-Impaler-themed—tourism, as the memories of that era begin to fade. However, they are still not openly promoting it, clinging to the hope that the country's tourism industry will one day evolve into something more uplifting.

There is no question that the legend of Vlad the Impaler and his fictional counterpart, Count Dracula, has brought valuable tourist dollars to Romania. Perhaps in the future, those who come for Dracula may return to explore the rest of Romania's rich history—a prospect that could satisfy everyone, regardless of how they feel about being associated with both a real and a fictional monster. ■

Statue of Vlad the Impaler in Sighisoara, Romania. Christian Rothe / Adobe Stock

Who Was the Real Vlad the Impaler?

In popular memory, Vlad Tepes Draculea, known to history as Vlad the Impaler, is remembered as a brutal ruler who delighted in torturing his enemies by impaling them on stakes. He is often cited as the inspiration for Count Dracula, the vampire introduced to the world by Bram Stoker in his 1897 novel. Yet Vlad's legacy is far more complex than this characterization suggests.

Vlad Tepes was born into an aristocratic family in 1431, in the city of Sighisoara in the Transylvania region. He eventually became the prince and military governor of the province of Wallachia. His 15th-century military campaigns were driven by a fierce determination to keep Wallachia free from domination by the Ottoman Empire and to secure his family's legacy, threatened by noble rivals who had conspired in the assassination of his father, the previous ruler of Wallachia.

While his extraordinary cruelty is undeniable, it was not uncommon in the brutal context of medieval times. According to many Romanians familiar with their country's history, Vlad's successes improved life for his people, shielding them from conquerors who would have been just as ruthless, if not worse. ■

Portrait of Vlad III (c. 1560), reputedly a copy of an original made during his lifetime.

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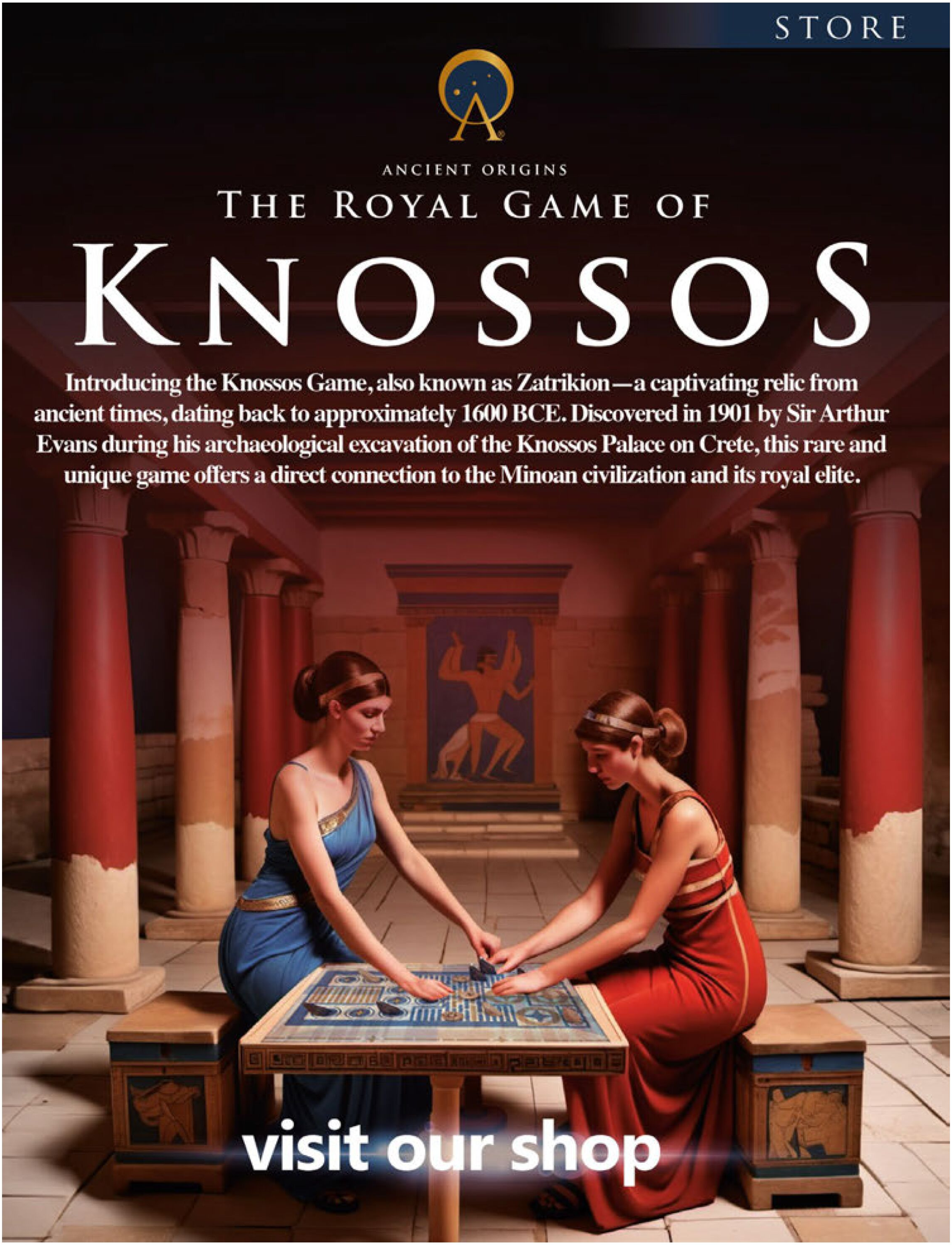

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Celebrating Abundance

THE WARKA VASE

and the Festival of Harvest

By: Jessica Nadeau

Standing at 3 feet 6 inches tall and weighing nearly 600 pounds, the Warka Vase from ancient Mesopotamia remains one of the most treasured artifacts of early narrative art. This 5,000-year-old alabaster masterpiece, thought to date from around 3200 to 3000 BC, vividly depicts a harvest festival held in honor of Inanna, the Sumerian goddess of fertility, love, war, and the patron deity of the ancient city of Uruk.

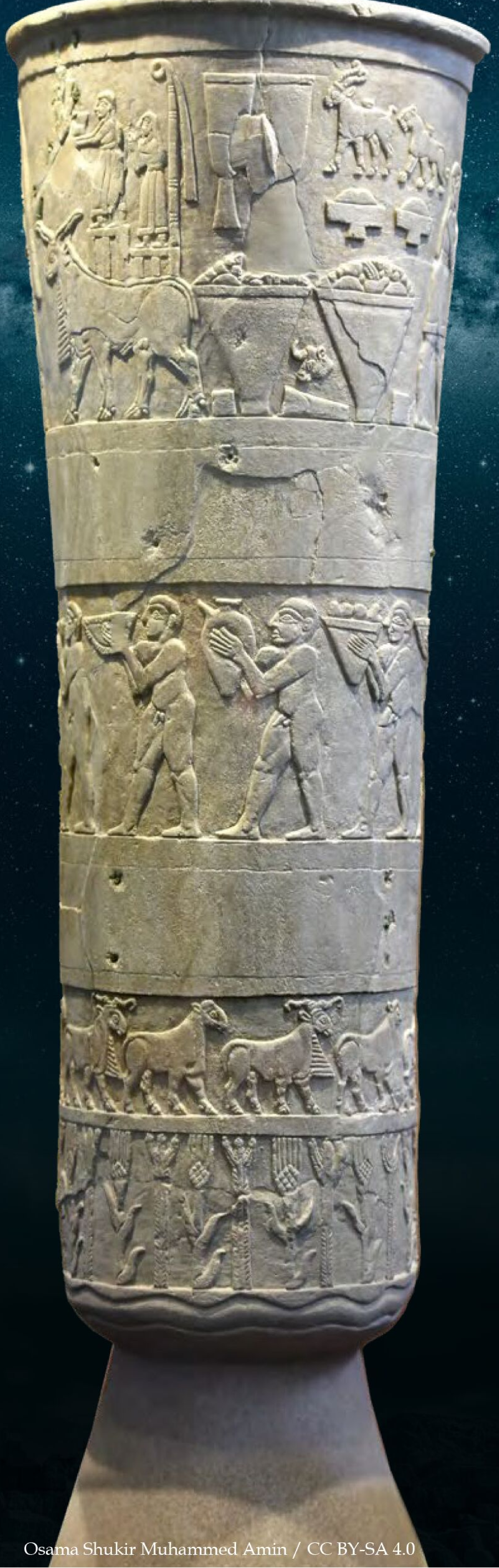
As one of the earliest known harvest festivals, the scene depicted on the vase celebrates the goddess Inanna as central to the agricultural cycles that sustained the people of Uruk, located in modern-day Warka, southern Iraq. The fragmented vase was uncovered during archaeological excavations conducted between 1933 and 1934 by German Assyriologists at the temple complex dedicated to the goddess, where these processions likely took place.

The vase is intricately carved with several registers or friezes, each adding to a rich narrative of abundance. At the bottom, wavy lines symbolize water, paired with alternating patterns of wheat and barley—emphasizing irrigation's vital role in crop growth. Above this, a band of rams and ewes appears in a rhythmic procession, illustrating the close relationship between agriculture and herding.

In the third register, a procession of nude men carries baskets and jars filled with the first fruits of the harvest as offerings to Inanna. In the final and most elaborate scene, the goddess is shown larger than other figures, emphasizing her divinity. Beside her, a nude man presents his harvest offering, while a robed leader or king stands behind, tethered by a rope held by an attendant. The figure of the leader underscores his vital role in Uruk's religious and agricultural life, symbolizing his connection to the gods as the source of prosperity and divine favor.

Amid the turmoil of the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, the Warka Vase was stolen from the Iraq Museum in Baghdad, part of a widespread looting of priceless artifacts. The U.S. military's failure to safeguard the museum turned the theft into a powerful symbol of cultural loss during the conflict. Later that year, the vase was recovered through an amnesty program, offering a small but significant restoration to Iraq's endangered heritage.

Today, the Warka Vase resides once again in Baghdad, on display in the Sumerian Gallery. Its turbulent journey—from its creation in ancient Mesopotamia to its near destruction in the modern era—underscores the fragility of cultural treasures. It serves as a powerful reminder of the broader threats to our shared history and the urgent need to safeguard such irreplaceable relics for future generations. ■



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By Jessica Nadeau

Embracing the Year of the Snake

the Serpent's

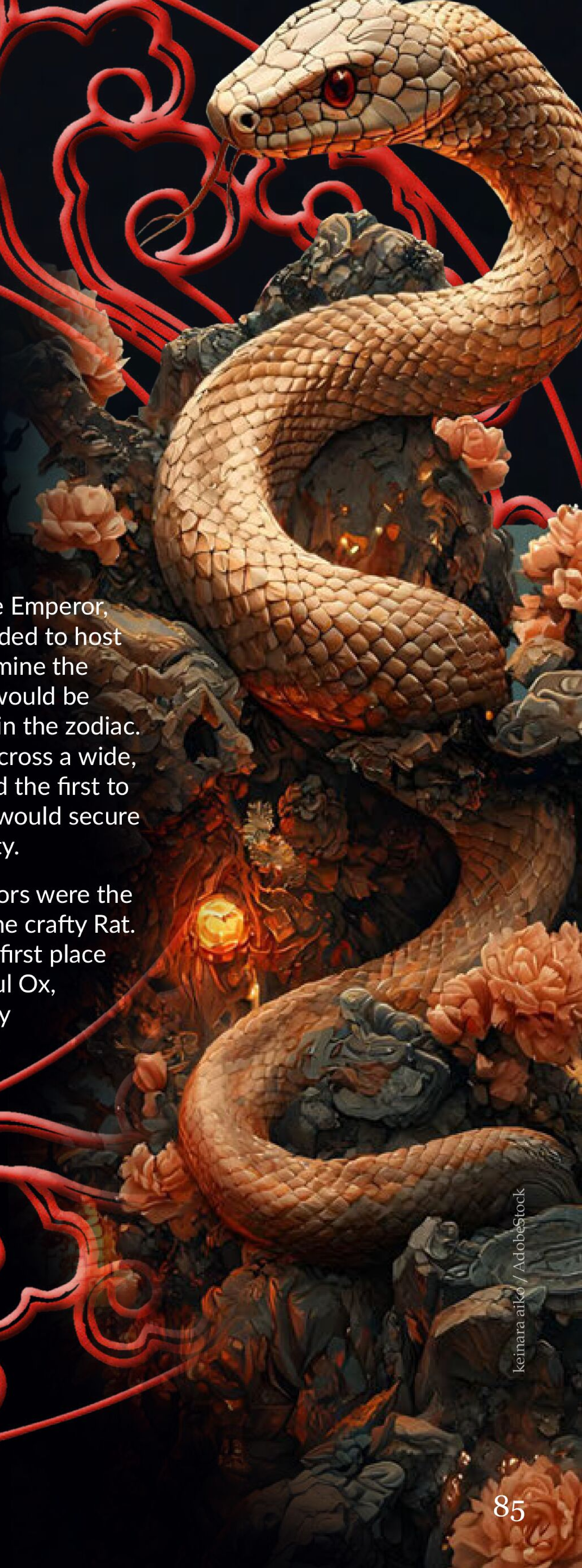
Path

The coming Year of the Snake will be an occasion that celebrates reflection and renewal, shedding the old and welcoming the wisdom of the Snake.

Every twelve years, the Chinese zodiac returns to the Snake, a symbol of quiet power, transformation, and mystery. This means that the coming Year of the Snake will be an occasion that celebrates reflection and renewal, shedding the old and welcoming the wisdom of the Snake.

Rooted in ancient Chinese myths, the story of how the Snake earned its place in the zodiac is one of cleverness and strategy. In a popular tale, the Jade Emperor, ruler of Heaven, decided to host a great race to determine the twelve animals that would be honored with a spot in the zodiac. The animals were to cross a wide, treacherous river, and the first to reach the other side would secure their place for eternity.

Among the competitors were the Ox, the Horse, and the crafty Rat. Though the Rat won first place by riding the powerful Ox, the Snake was equally clever, hiding itself in



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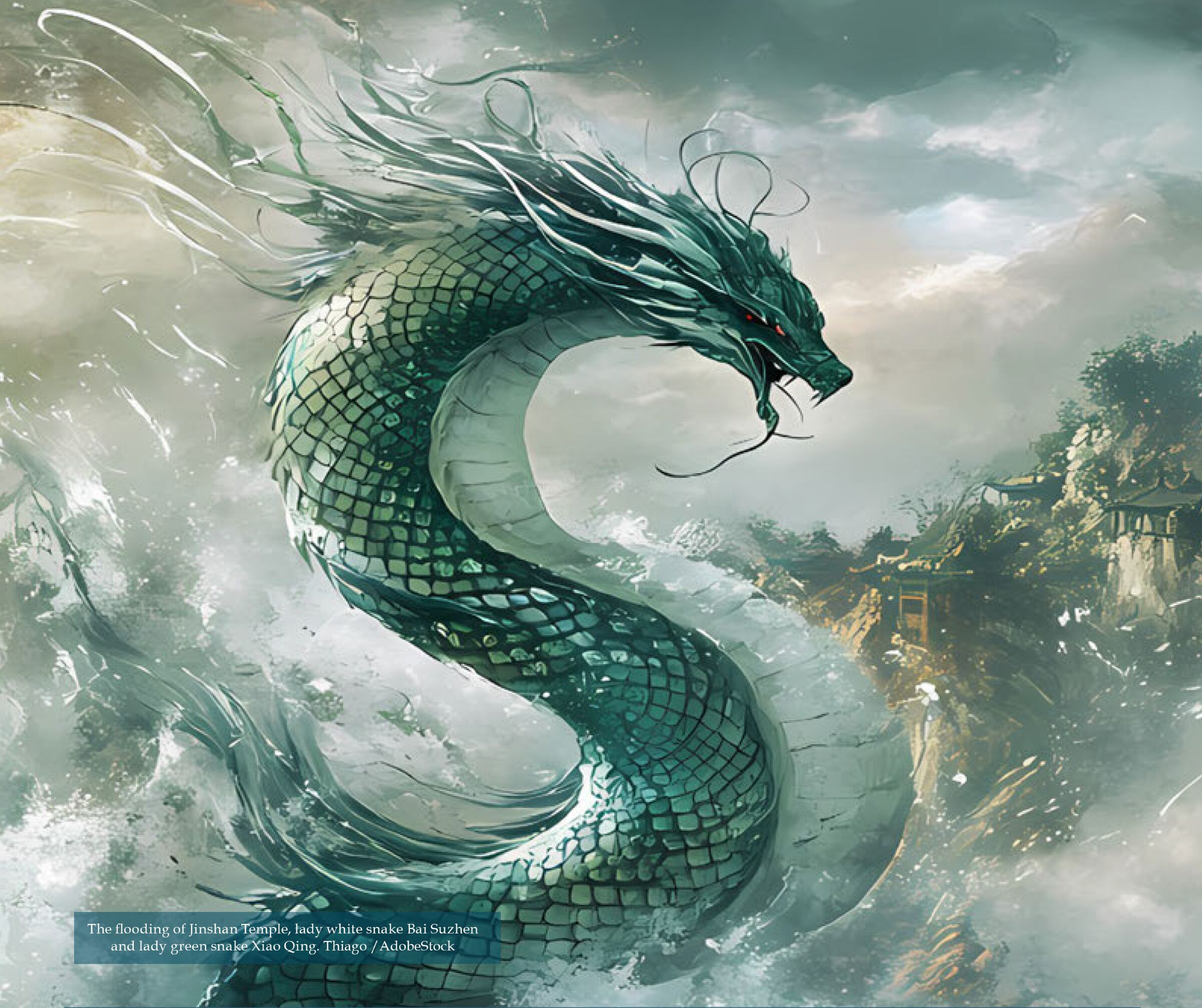
the Horse's mane, riding along unnoticed. Just before the Horse crossed the finish line, the Snake slithered out, startling the Horse and winning sixth place. The Snake relied on its intelligence and timing, winning its place by strategy rather than strength, reflecting the core qualities of the Snake in the zodiac: intelligence, patience, and the ability to act with precision when the opportunity arises.

This year the Chinese New Year, also known as the Spring Festival, falls on January 29, 2025. While most countries celebrate the Gregorian calendar New Year's Day on January 1, the Chinese New Year is connected to lunar cycles which fluctuate and cause its date to vary annually.

The mythology of the Snake extends beyond the race as well. In Chinese folklore, snakes often bridge the human and mystical worlds, appearing in stories that speak to love, transformation, and creation. One of the most famous tales is the *Legend of the White Snake*, a story of forbidden love and sacrifice.

In this tale, Bai Suzhen, a beautiful snake spirit, transforms into a woman to explore the world of mortals. She meets Xu Xian, a kind man, and they fall in love and marry. However, their happiness is disrupted when the monk Fa Hai discovers Bai Suzhen's true identity and tries to separate them, believing their union defies the natural order. Fa Hai traps Bai Suzhen, imprisoning her beneath a mountain.

Heartbroken, Xu Xian waits for his wife. Eventually, Bai Suzhen escapes using her supernatural powers, but is forced to give up



The flooding of Jinshan Temple, lady white snake Bai Suzhen and lady green snake Xiao Qing. Thiago / AdobeStock

her human form. Despite their separation, the couple's love endures. In this case, the serpent is a bridge between two worlds, revealing the hidden truths that exist beneath the surface of everyday life. The snake is not a creature to be feared, but one to be understood and respected, as it carries both wisdom and beauty, light and shadow.

In Chinese creation myths, the divine siblings, Nuwa and Fuxi, are credited with the creation of humanity after the great flood. Nuwa and Fuxi, born with the bodies of serpents, shaped the first humans from clay and breathed life into them. Nuwa is said to have created humans while Fuxi taught them the art of survival, including hunting, fishing, and the early forms of writing. This creation myth connects the Snake to both life's beginning and its evolution. Like Nuwa and Fuxi, the Snake is both nurturing and guiding—capable of bringing forth new life while imparting wisdom that shapes future generations.

This year the Chinese New Year, also known as the Spring Festival, falls on January 29, 2025. While most countries celebrate the Gregorian calendar New Year's Day on January 1, the Chinese New Year is connected to lunar cycles which fluctuate and cause its date to vary annually. In addition to the 12 animals of the zodiac, each year is associated with one of five

elements—wood, fire, earth, metal, or water—creating a wonderfully unique combination that repeats every 60 years.

This year's Snake is governed by the element of Wood, not last seen since 1965. Wood represents growth, creativity, flexibility, and opportunities for personal change, especially in areas requiring innovation. Just as the snake outgrows its old skin, the Year of the Wood Snake is a time for individuals to release what no longer serves them—old fears, outdated beliefs, or limiting habits. The Green Wood Snake teaches that transformation often requires letting go of the past and embracing the unknown. It's a time to fully embrace new ideas, try new things, and break free from old patterns to make room for fresh opportunities.

To add to the excitement, the Snake also symbolizes wisdom and intuition, and 2025 will be a year for people to trust their inner voices. The Snake moves quietly and strategically, with patience and calculated decision-making. Impulsiveness is not the answer. Instead, the Year of the Wood Snake encourages deep reflection before taking action and trusting in one's ability to move with purpose. The Snake's subtle strength does not need to be loud or dramatic. Often, the most significant changes occur when we move with grace, trust the process, and allow time to unfold. This year, embrace the wisdom of the Snake. ■

Just as the snake outgrows its old skin, the Year of the Wood Snake is a time for individuals to release what no longer serves them—old fears, outdated beliefs, or limiting habits. The Green Wood Snake teaches that transformation often requires letting go of the past and embracing the unknown.

THE GRAND CANAL IN VENICE, ITALY

This iconic vista provides a stunning backdrop to one of Venice's most memorable celebrations. The *Regata Storica*, held annually on the first Sunday of September, transforms the Grand Canal into a vibrant display of history and tradition. First recorded in the 13th century, the event originated in Venice's maritime culture, training gondoliers and commemorating naval achievements. It begins with the *Corteo Storico*, a parade reenacting the 1489 welcome of Caterina Cornaro, who ceded her throne to Venice. Thrilling rowing races follow, showcasing traditional styles and celebrating the city's enduring connection to its waterways.

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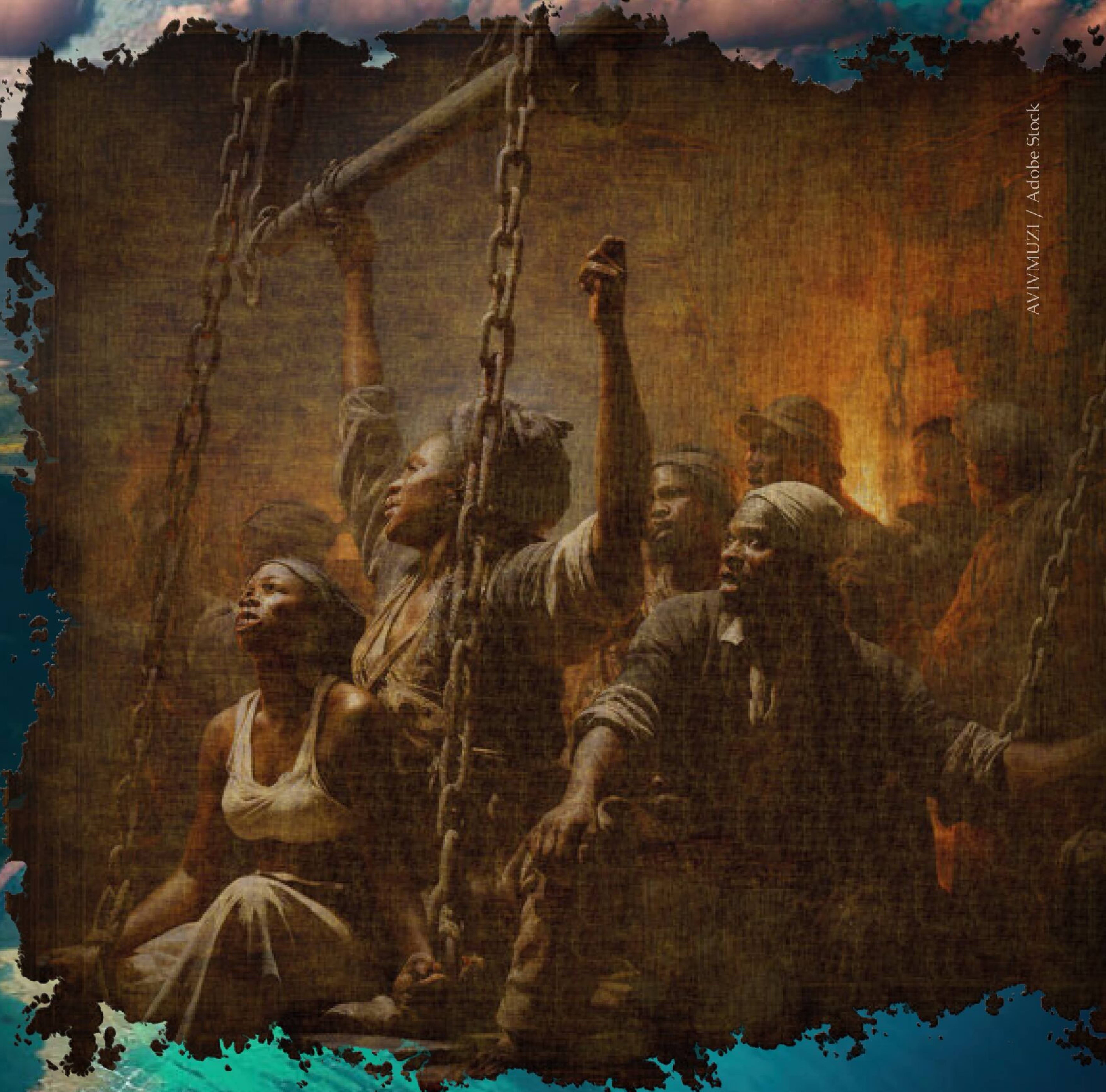
LE MORNE BRABANT

A SANCTUARY FOR SLAVE MAROONS IN MAURITIUS

By Dr. Micki Pistorius,
with contributions by Cecilia Bogaard

At the southwestern tip of Mauritius, a lush, tropical jewel in the Indian Ocean, stands the brooding Le Morne Brabant mountain. Declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2008, it serves as a solemn monument to the abolition of slavery. According to legend, marooned slaves once leapt to their deaths from Le Morne's high cliffs, mistakenly believing that an approaching expedition of soldiers intended to capture them—when, in fact, it had come to inform them of their manumission.

During the 10th century, Phoenicians and Arab mariners named the island Dina Robin, but they did not settle. Neither did the Portuguese, who visited the island in the late 15th and early 16th centuries. The Portuguese had built Elmina Castle (in Ghana, Africa), which became a slave trade fortress, and had no need for another in the Indian Ocean. Additionally, Mauritius did not offer the gold they were seeking.



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ACCORDING TO LEGEND, MAROONED SLAVES ONCE LEAPT TO THEIR DEATHS FROM LE MORNE'S HIGH CLIFFS, MISTAKENLY BELIEVING THAT AN APPROACHING EXPEDITION OF SOLDIERS INTENDED TO CAPTURE THEM—WHEN, IN FACT, IT HAD COME TO INFORM THEM OF THEIR MANUMISSION.

By the late 16th century, the Dutch named the island after Mauritz, the Prince of Orange, but they only settled on the island in 1638. A settlement required labor, and thus the Indian Ocean was in a flurry with slave ships importing human cargo from Africa, Madagascar, Indonesia, China, India, and the Seychelles to the tiny tropical island.

Slaves Set Foot in Mauritius

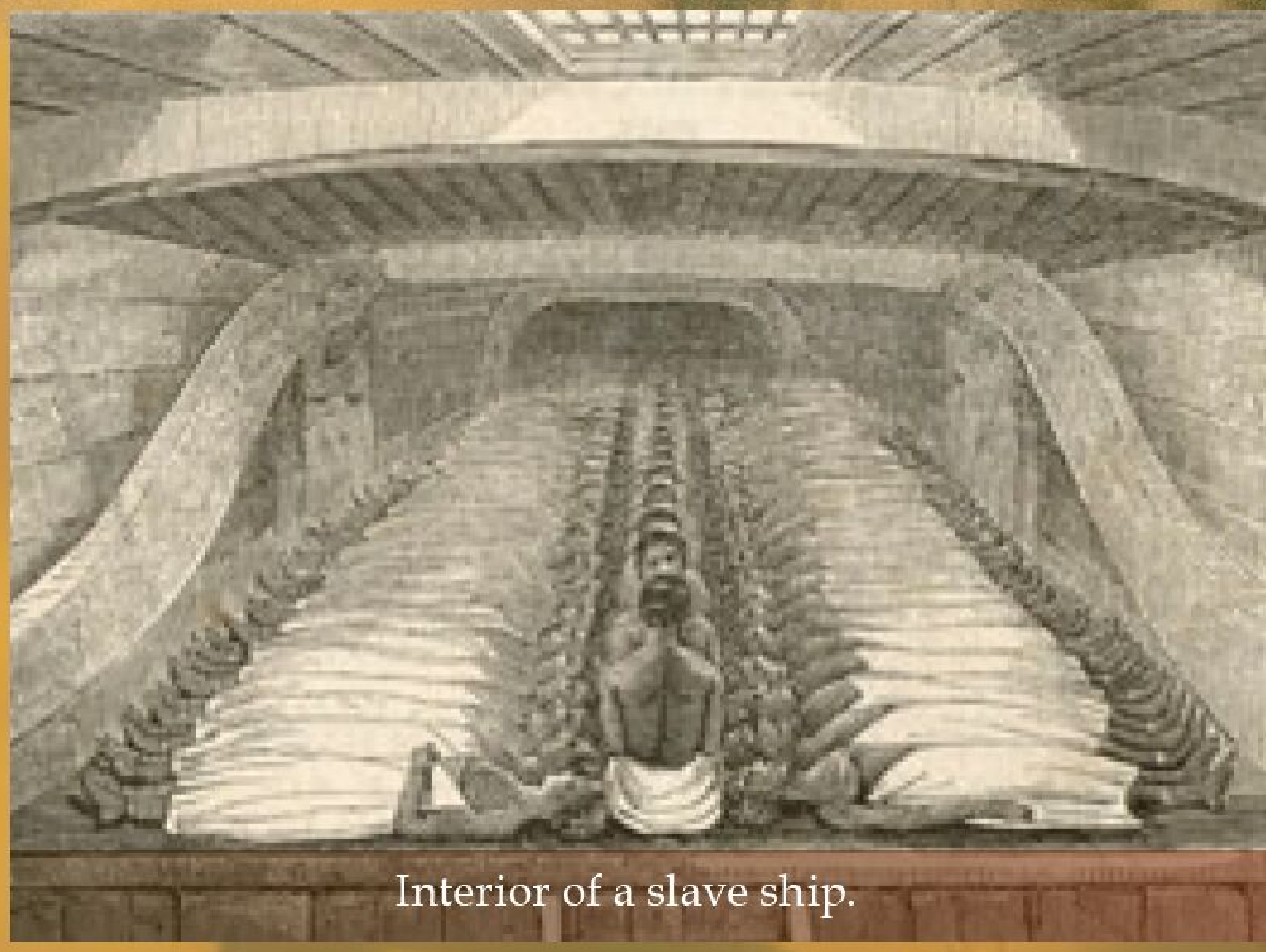
One can scarcely imagine what humans had to endure, cramped into a space between the deck and the hold, lying spoon-to-spoon next to another wretched stranger. They were subjected to the moaning, groaning, and screams of fellow captives; the smell of feces, urine, vomit, body odors, and sometimes rotting flesh; the thirst that scorched their dry throats and parched, swollen tongues, and the hunger that gnawed at both soul and body; the cramping of limbs in shackles that bit into flesh, fever which brought racking convulsions, and the putrid, suffocating air they were forced to breathe.

These enslaved human beings were reduced to a state where the only control remaining over their senses was the choice to close or open their eyes to the surrounding horror and suffering. Little respite was offered; in good weather, enslaved people were forced to dance on deck to stay alive through exercise and avoid becoming a financial loss.

A slave ship could carry anywhere from 200 to 600 persons, but they were often overcrowded to the brim. The number of enslaved people was supposed to be restricted to the ship's tonnage, but no one abided by these laws. Manacled together, enslaved individuals often could not make it to ablution buckets in time, and many suffered from dysentery and diarrhea.

IT IS SAID THAT THE STENCH ON THE WIND OFTEN ANNOUNCED THE ARRIVAL OF A SLAVE SHIP LONG BEFORE IT ENTERED A PORT.

"The excessive heat was not the only thing that rendered their situation intolerable. The deck, that is the floor of their rooms, was so covered with the blood and mucus which had proceeded from them in consequence of the flux, that it resembled a slaughterhouse," wrote Alexander Falconbridge, a surgeon aboard slave ships and later the governor of a British colony for freed slaves in Sierra Leone. It is said that the stench on the wind often announced the arrival of a slave ship long before it entered a port.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Interior of a slave ship.

In 1639, along with deer, farming stock animals, seeds, sugarcane, and tobacco, the first slaves were imported to Mauritius by the Dutch commander Adriaan van der Stel. Upon imprinting their first footsteps on the fertile

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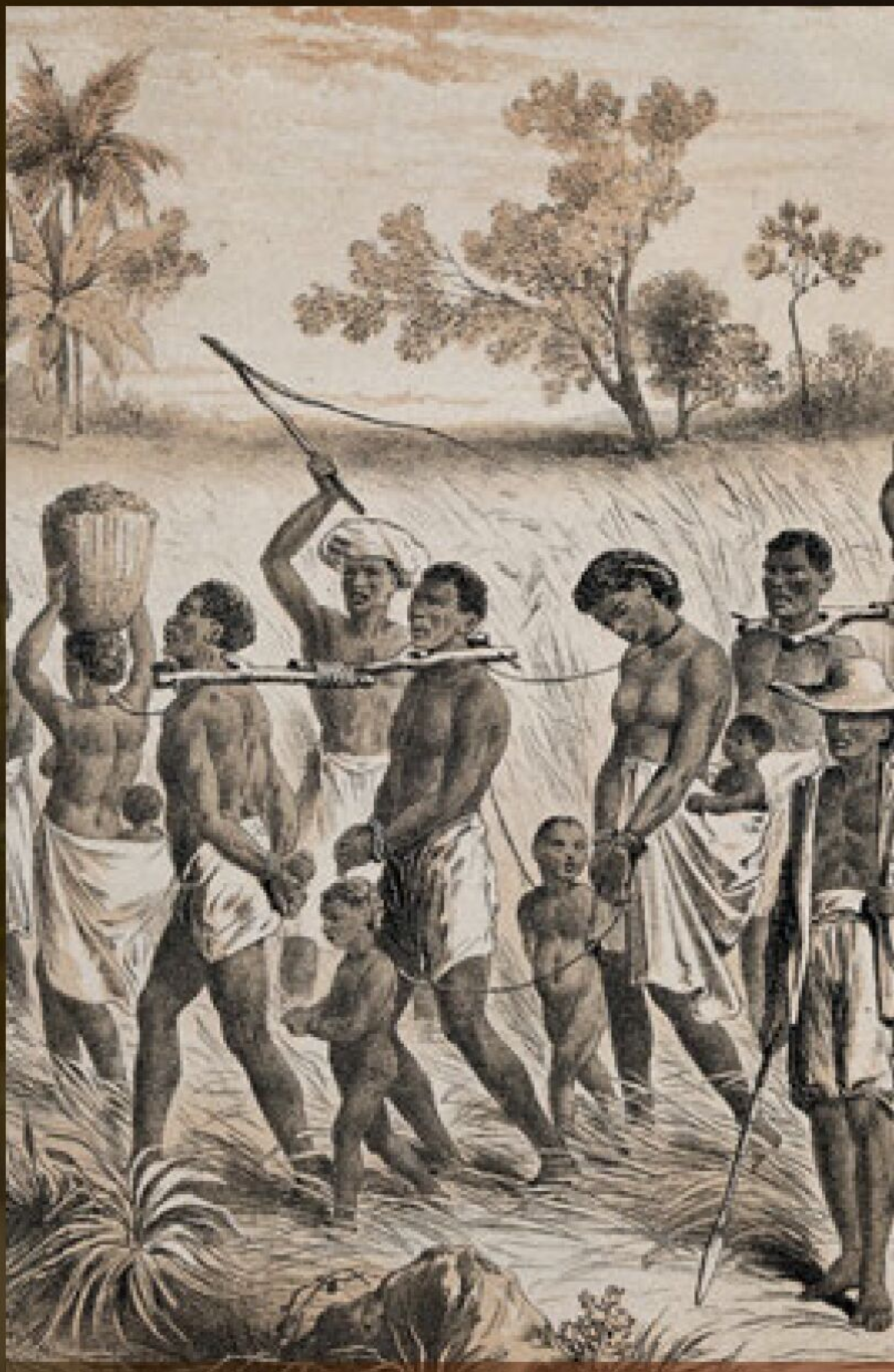
volcanic soil, some immediately managed to escape and marooned themselves in the lush, green, dense forests. In 1642, just over a hundred more slaves were brought from Madagascar to supplement the workforce. Again, half of them escaped, and only 18 were recaptured. In 1679, the Dutch imported 153 settlers to the island, of whom 19 were slaves and a handful were convicts. Scarcely 60 years after slaves were first imported, the island experienced its first mutiny.

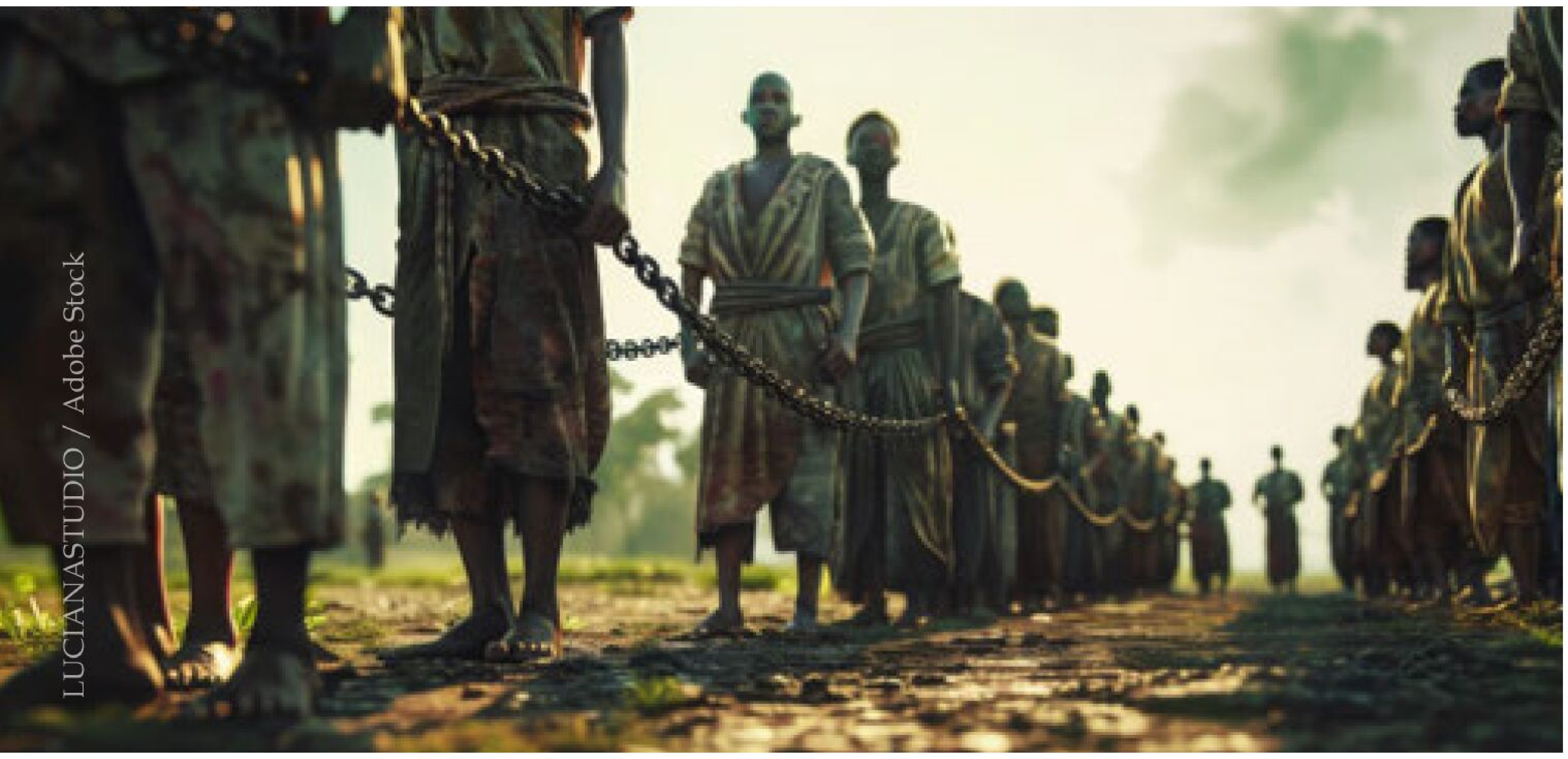
ALTHOUGH PUNISHMENT WAS METED OUT TO THE SLAVES, THE PSYCHE OF BOTH CAPTOR AND CAPTIVE WAS NOW INFESTED WITH RECIPROCAL DISTRUST. THE SEEDS OF FEAR—OF THE CONSEQUENCES OF CAPTURE, BUT ALSO OF MUTINY, UPRISING, AND REVOLT—HAD BEEN SOWN.

On June 18, 1695, after careful planning, the slaves Aaron of Amboina, Paul from Batavia, and the women Anna and Esperance succeeded in burning down Fort Frederick Hendrik, the settlement built by the Dutch—by means of slave labor—on the east coast of the island. The slaves were captured and subjected to brutal punishments. The men were crucified, their flesh torn with red-hot pliers, and left to endure excruciating agony until sunset, when they were finally put to death. The women were scorched with palmetto leaves, strangled, and their corpses affixed to gibbets as grim warnings to others.


Group of men and women being taken to a slave market. Wellcome Library / CC BY 4.0

Although punishment was meted out to the slaves, the psyche of both captor and captive was now infested with reciprocal distrust. The seeds of fear—of the consequences of capture, but also of mutiny, uprising, and revolt—had been sown.

However, the basic yearning for freedom overcame the fear of capture for many, and by 1710, there was a well-established community of marooned slaves living in the surrounding forests and mountains, setting up



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shelters and cultivating the land. They frequently attacked the Dutch settlement, leading to counterraids. In 1706, they burned down all the buildings again. The governor reported that the settlers were "continually in dread" of the slaves. For various reasons—pirates, flooding, crop failure, cyclones, and attacks by marooned slaves—the Dutch decided to abandon the island in 1710 and focused their efforts on the Cape of Good Hope.

The Arrival of the French

For five years, marooned slaves thrived in relative peace, save for the occasional presence of pirates, who used the island but showed little interest in the escaped slaves. The next flag to billow over the jewel of the Indian Ocean was French, beginning in 1715. The French East India Company claimed the island for France, and in 1767 the company sold Mauritius to the French government.

By 1715, France was already a well-established slaver nation. The French Edict of March 1685, called the *Code Noir*, declared slaves to be movable property. Regarding punishment for escapees, it stipulated that after a month's absenteeism, a captured slave would have his ear cut off and his shoulder branded with the *Fleur de Lys*, the flower of the lily which serves as a symbol of French royalty. After the second escape and recapture, his hamstrings would be cut, and his other shoulder branded. At the third attempt, he would be executed. By 1775, the death sentence was repealed, and a third-time escapee would instead be sentenced to life in chains and public works.

One can only marvel at the determination of slaves who still sought freedom, even after their hamstrings were cut. To deter others from escaping, mutilated bodies and dismembered limbs were displayed in public, while decapitated heads and hands were interred in the slave cemetery.

By 1735, during the administration of Governor Bertrand Mahé de Labourdonnais, the enslaved population on Mauritius numbered 650. Labourdonnais, a man of vision, developed commerce on the island. Commerce required infrastructure, which necessitated labor. The Governor of Madagascar, Nicolau de Almeida,

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agreed to sell between 1,000 and 2,000 enslaved people per year to Mauritius. By 1750, the enslaved population had increased to 8,000. By 1767, there were 18,000 enslaved individuals, and by the end of the 1790s, they numbered 50,000.

With their numbers growing, slaves still escaped in their thousands, with an estimated 11 to 20 percent fleeing each year. Labourdonnais established a specialized, uniformed Special Detachment consisting of “black maroon hunters” and offered incentives for recapturing marooned slaves. He adopted an organized approach to recapture operations, setting up military posts and patrol units, which forced the maroons to retreat deeper into inaccessible areas. Defiant marooned slaves besieged military posts in the districts of Savanne and Poste de Flacq in 1722 and 1732, respectively. Nevertheless, the unit proved highly effective; in 1739, they managed to recapture one of the maroon leaders, Sans Souci.

In June 1767, Sylvestre Larose and his wife, Thérèse, were

NOT ONLY WERE ENSLAVED PEOPLE IMPORTED TO MAURITIUS FOR LOCAL LABOR, BUT BY THE LATE 18TH CENTURY, MAURITIUS HAD BECOME A SLAVE-TRADING EPICENTER. ENSLAVED INDIVIDUALS FROM MADAGASCAR, MOZAMBIQUE, THE SOUTHEASTERN COAST OF AFRICA, AND ASIA WERE ASSEMBLED THERE FOR SHIPMENT TO FRENCH COLONIES IN THE AMERICAS

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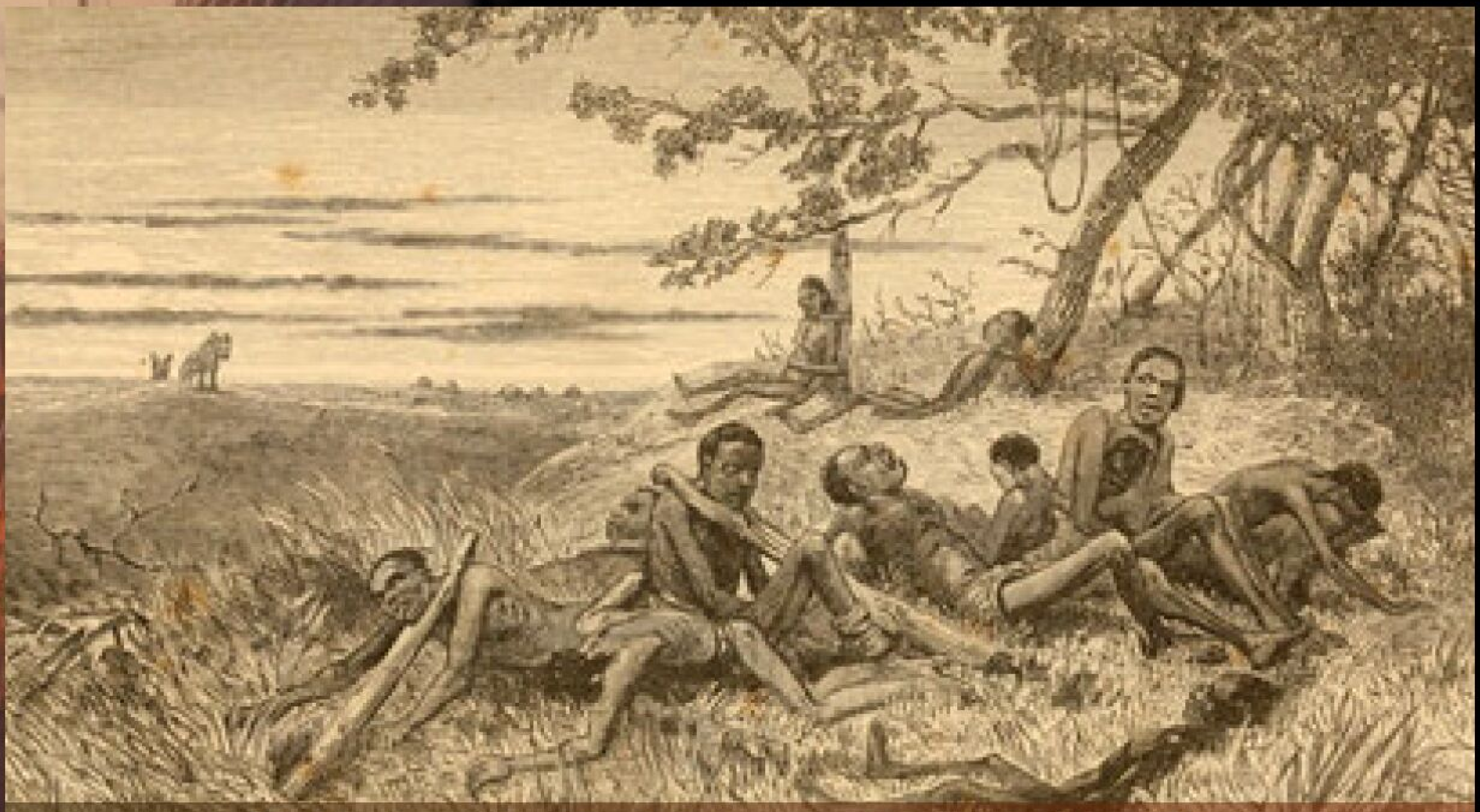
recaptured after spending 11 years in marooned freedom. Bellaca, the infamous chief of the bandits of Le Morne, had become a legend, prompting the government to place a high price on his head. Bellaca was finally killed by Stanislas Cerf, a fellow enslaved person, who claimed the bounty. Other leaders emerged as maroons continued their resistance. Alexandre commanded a band of 30 maroons who escaped to the mountain behind Port Louis and launched terror raids on its inhabitants, while Antigone, a female chief, led a similar group operating from Le Pouce. By 1775, the persistent resistance of maroons had escalated, with about 1,300 marooned slaves terrorizing the vicinity of Port Louis.

Not only were enslaved people imported to Mauritius for local labor, but by the late 18th century, Mauritius had become a slave-trading epicenter. Enslaved individuals from Madagascar, Mozambique, the southeastern coast of Africa, and Asia were assembled there for shipment to French colonies in the Americas.

By 1783, the port of Port Louis was a hub of activity, with hundreds of ships docking for repairs and trade. News of the French Revolution reached Mauritius on January 29, 1790, inspiring Mauritian settlers to form their own administration to promote trade, called the Colonial Assembly (disbanded by Napoleon's regime in 1803). In the spirit of the revolution's ethos of *Liberté*, *Égalité*, and *Fraternité*, the new French government abolished slavery in 1794. However, when their envoy reached Mauritius in 1796 to implement this policy, the recalcitrant Mauritian sugarcane plantation owners and merchants rejected it and sent the envoy away. By this time, the enslaved population had exceeded 50,000.

A significant Free Population also existed, comprising sailors,



The Last Journals of David Livingstone, in central Africa (1874).

craftsmen, and artisans who had married enslaved women and acquired citizen rights. Indian women, in particular, were highly sought after and sold at premium prices.

The rise of Napoleon in 1803 had a profound impact on the slave trade in Mauritius. Faced with economic pressures, he issued a decree permitting the trade to continue. By 1807, the enslaved population on the island had swelled to 65,400.

Britannia Rules the Indian Ocean Waves

Meanwhile, in Britain, William Wilberforce, a determined abolitionist, campaigned relentlessly for the freedom of enslaved people, and by 1807, a motion to abolish the slave trade was approved by the House of Commons.

With France preoccupied by domestic issues, Britain saw an opportunity to seize Mauritius as a critical key to the Indian Ocean trade route. The British were also infuriated by the local Mauritian administration's support of French pirates like Robert Surcouf, who ruthlessly raided British ships in the Indian Ocean. Although the British navy suffered defeat at the Battle of Grand Port, just a few months later, on December 3, 1810, British forces arrived in Port Louis. The Mauritians capitulated to the British under strict conditions allowing French settlers to maintain much of their lifestyle, with one major exception: the island's name was changed from Isle de France to Mauritius.

The year 1810 also marked the promulgation of the Slave Trade Abolition Act in Britain. This, however, did little to deter Mauritians, who continued trading enslaved people illegally. The British Parliament decreed that all individuals obtained illegally after 1813 were to be freed without compensation. By then, an estimated 30,000 enslaved people had already been smuggled into Mauritius since 1810. Slave traders, fearing capture by British ships patrolling the illegal trade, would resort to horrific measures, such as throwing enslaved

THE YEAR 1810 ALSO MARKED THE PROMULGATION OF THE SLAVE TRADE ABOLITION ACT IN BRITAIN. THIS, HOWEVER, DID LITTLE TO DETER MAURITIANS, WHO CONTINUED TRADING ENSLAVED PEOPLE ILLEGALLY.

individuals overboard. The captain of the *Jeune Estelle*, for instance, threw barrels containing teenage slave girls overboard.

To help enforce abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, British naval forces took additional measures, navigating uncharted rivers along the African coast to confront chiefs complicit in the black ivory trade, in which Africans sold their own people into slavery. Eventually, this practice declined, and Africa shifted its trade focus to commodities like cocoa, coffee, timber, ivory, gold, and other goods sought by Europeans.

FEBRUARY 1, 1839, MARKED THE DAY OF EMANCIPATION, A MOMENT OF TRUE FREEDOM WHEN FORMERLY ENSLAVED PEOPLE CELEBRATED BY WEARING SHOES FOR THE FIRST TIME. TODAY, FEBRUARY 1 IS OBSERVED AS A PUBLIC HOLIDAY IN MAURITIUS, HONORING THE RESILIENCE AND LIBERATION OF ITS PEOPLE.

The British administration and French sugar plantation owners were at constant loggerheads over the issue of slavery. The British faced a conundrum: Mauritius was fast becoming Britain's main sugar-producing colony, and it depended heavily on slave labor. In fact, by 1830 Mauritius had the third-largest enslaved population within the British Empire, surpassing even the Cape Colony. As a result, the slave owners staged a protest against abolition in Port Louis, further heightening tensions.

Negotiations between Mauritius and the British government dragged on for years, culminating in the arrival of British Procureur General John Jeremy in February 1832. His presence sparked a rebellion and a general strike, during which businesses shut down. A month and a half later, Jeremy was sent back to Britain. The British government lamented: "Neither Acts of Parliament nor Orders in Council, nor local Ordinances have been of force to secure obedience of a handful of white inhabitants of that small island" and "the people of Mauritius have been too strong for the people of Great Britain."

By 1832, more than 10,000 enslaved people lived in communities, mostly in camps or compounds set aside by plantation owners, primarily in the northern and western districts of the island, later known as Pamplemousses, Rivière du Rempart, and Flacq.

On August 28, 1833, Britain passed the Act for the Abolition of Slavery, paving the way for the liberation of enslaved people across its colonies. Approximately 80,000 enslaved individuals in Mauritius were freed between August 1, 1834, and August 1, 1835. However, their freedom came with conditions as they were subjected to a system of apprenticeship, which required them to continue working in exchange for compensation. Children under the age of six were freed immediately. Plantation owners, meanwhile, were compensated for the loss of enslaved labor, and much of this money was reinvested in modernizing sugar farms.

February 1, 1839, marked the Day of Emancipation, a moment of true freedom when formerly enslaved people celebrated by wearing

shoes for the first time. Today, February 1 is observed as a public holiday in Mauritius, honoring the resilience and liberation of its people.

After their final manumission, some former enslaved people remained on sugarcane plantations as domestic workers or coachmen. However, many sought to distance themselves from their former oppressors and settled as “free blacks” in coastal villages such as Ville Noire, where they became fishermen, cattle farmers, or planters. Others enlisted as sailors to leave the island, while some worked as dockers, unloading cargo for meager wages—the lowest paid among the workforce.

The Legacy of the Slaves

Adolphe Macquet, in *Domaine Terrier* (1887), refers to the tangible legacy of the enslaved in the civil infrastructure they built on the island. Yet, their intangible legacy—their resistance, yearning for freedom, and reclaiming of their humanity—demands greater respect.

Enslaved individuals were denied not only the basic provision of shoes but, far more grievously, their dignity and lineage. Those who were captured and kidnapped retained only a vague memory of their familial roots and genealogy, but those born in captivity were denied even that. In their new home, they had to establish new roots despite overwhelming psychological odds. Beyond the absence of physical freedom, they faced psychological bondage, whose effects could ripple through later generations. There was always the danger

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that future generations of the enslaved might "just accept their fate."

For some, suicide, drinking, or succumbing to despair and heartache became psychological escapes. Yet others steadfastly persisted, offering resistance through passive-aggressive behaviors such as subtle sabotage, vandalism, or deliberate indifference when physical escape was impossible.

Those who marooned carried the torch for humanity. Even when they were captured or killed, they passed on the *L'Esprit de Liberté* to those who followed in their footsteps to freedom. Never underestimate the resilience of the human spirit.

Le Morne's Hidden Histories: A World Heritage of Resistance

Between the 17th and 19th centuries, Le Morne Brabant—a striking basaltic monolith rising 1,824 feet on the southwestern tip of Mauritius—served as a sanctuary for marooned slaves. The mountain's steep cliffs and dense vegetation made it an ideal refuge, virtually inaccessible to those who sought to capture its inhabitants.

THE MOUNTAIN IS ALSO STEEPED IN LEGEND. ACCORDING TO THE MOST POPULAR AND OFFICIAL VERSION, MAROONS LEAPED TO THEIR DEATHS FROM ITS CLIFFS IN AN ACT OF MASS-SUICIDE, MISTAKENLY BELIEVING THAT SOLDIERS CLIMBING THE MOUNTAIN HAD COME TO RE-ENSLAVE THEM.

Amédée Nagapen, in *Le Maroonage à l'Île de France*, reports that marooned slaves established self-sufficient communities at Le Morne. They cultivated crops, elected leaders, and armed themselves to resist capture. James Backhouse, in *Narrative of a Voyage to Mauritius and South Africa* (1838), described their secretive lives in caves near the mountain's summit. Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, in *Voyage à l'Île de France* (1768–1770), chronicled their preference for death over recapture.

In *A Ramble Round Mauritius* (1859), George Clark wrote about a marooned slave and his two young children who enjoyed a simple but free existence in a cave on Le Morne, even breeding bees, until their eventual capture.

The mountain is also steeped in legend. According to the most popular and official version, maroons leaped to their deaths from its cliffs in an act of mass-suicide, mistakenly believing that soldiers climbing the mountain had come to re-enslave them. In reality, the soldiers were reportedly sent to notify them of their freedom following the abolition of slavery. Tragically, the maroons were unaware of this and chose death over what they believed would be a return to bondage. Another conflicting account, supported by research from Dr. Anneloes Smitsman and oral histories from descendants of slaves in Mauritius, suggests the maroons were betrayed by one of their own and massacred by French slave owners who offered them the impossible choice of torture or jumping to their deaths. Both versions remain unsubstantiated, underscoring the complex and contested legacy of resistance tied to the mountain.

Le Morne's significance extends beyond its dramatic history. Designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site on July 7, 2008, it stands as a global symbol of resilience and the fight for freedom. Under the auspices of the Le Morne Heritage Trust Fund Board, the mountain had earlier been declared a National Heritage Site in 2006. Notably, the Maroon Slave Archaeological Investigation Project of the University of Mauritius (2002–2003) conducted fieldwork to uncover and preserve its cultural and historical legacy. Today, Le Morne serves as a powerful reminder of the sacrifices made in the name of liberty and the enduring strength of the human spirit to resist oppression.

DESIGNATED A UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE SITE ON JULY 7, 2008, IT STANDS AS A GLOBAL SYMBOL OF RESILIENCE AND THE FIGHT FOR FREEDOM.

The Slave Route Monument at the foot of Le Morne, inaugurated in 2009, features sculptures symbolizing the regions from which enslaved individuals were brought to Mauritius, including Madagascar, Mozambique, India, and Southeast Asia. These works underscore the island's connection to the international slave trade and its role in the broader narrative of resistance and liberation. ■

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Despite its Ritual Importance, “Toasting” Came from a Piece of Toast

By Cecilia Bogaard

We’ve all taken part in toasting rituals. At birthdays and weddings, in remembrance of loved ones or as a sign of respect, modern-day toasts range from a polite nod while wetting one’s lips to guzzling down alcohol after the speaking of witty words. But have you ever wondered where the name itself comes from? While toasting goes back much earlier in history, it appears that the word itself originates with a humble piece of toast.

It seems that in the late 17th century, people would use spiced toast to flavor their drinks and make them more appetizing, to improve the smell, and soak up the acidic sediments. The tradition is similar to that of Spaniards putting fresh fruit in their poor-quality-wine *sangria*, or Mexicans serving lime and salt with tequila to cover the taste.

According to *Merriam Webster*, people being “toasted,” or having someone drink to their health, “developed by association with the act of literally raising a piece of toast in a cup in someone’s honor.” In other words, the word “toast” morphed into referring to the person being honored.

The action has its roots in ancient Greece, when men would gather at symposiums and drink to the health of their gods. The tradition continued with the Roman Empire, and then with Christians raising glasses to their saints. For the Romans it was such an important ritual, that the Senate decreed all diners had to toast the health of Emperor Augustus at every meal. *NPR* claims that clinking glasses came with Christianity, due to the belief that the “bell-like noise would drive off the devil.”

Throughout history, and despite strict protocols, toasting has worked to get the party started, serving as an eventful drinking game. In the 17th century, young Englishmen would stab themselves, mix their blood in the wine and then drink to the health of the woman they loved. As a result, some cultures decided to control the celebrations. The Order of the Temperance set its sights on banning toasting in Germany in the 1500s, Louis XIV banned toasting in France, and the Massachusetts Puritans in 1634 saw it as a Devilish trait inherited from “Pagans, heathens, and infidels.” ■

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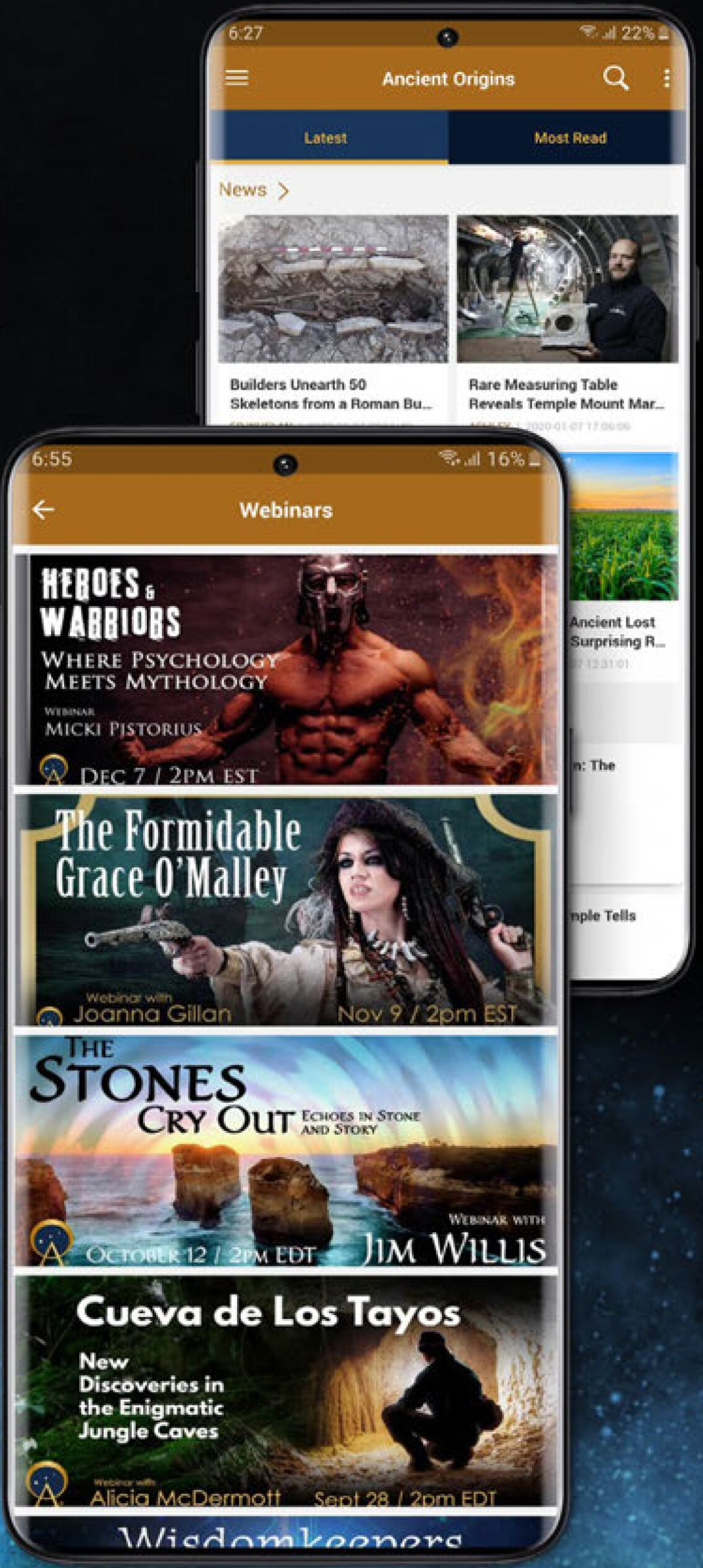

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SANCTUARY OF THE VIRGIN OF EL ROCÍO IN DOÑANA NATIONAL PARK, HUELVA, SPAIN

The Romería del Rocío, one of Spain's most renowned pilgrimages, has drawn the faithful to the Sanctuary of the Virgin of El Rocío, near the marshlands of Doñana National Park in Andalusia, for centuries. According to legend, a hunter discovered a statue of the Virgin Mary inside a tree trunk near the site, inspiring its veneration as Santa María de las Rocinas, first recorded in 1335. The modern pilgrimage began in 1640 with the founding of the Almonte Brotherhood. Today, it attracts hundreds of thousands annually in a vibrant celebration of faith, tradition, and community.

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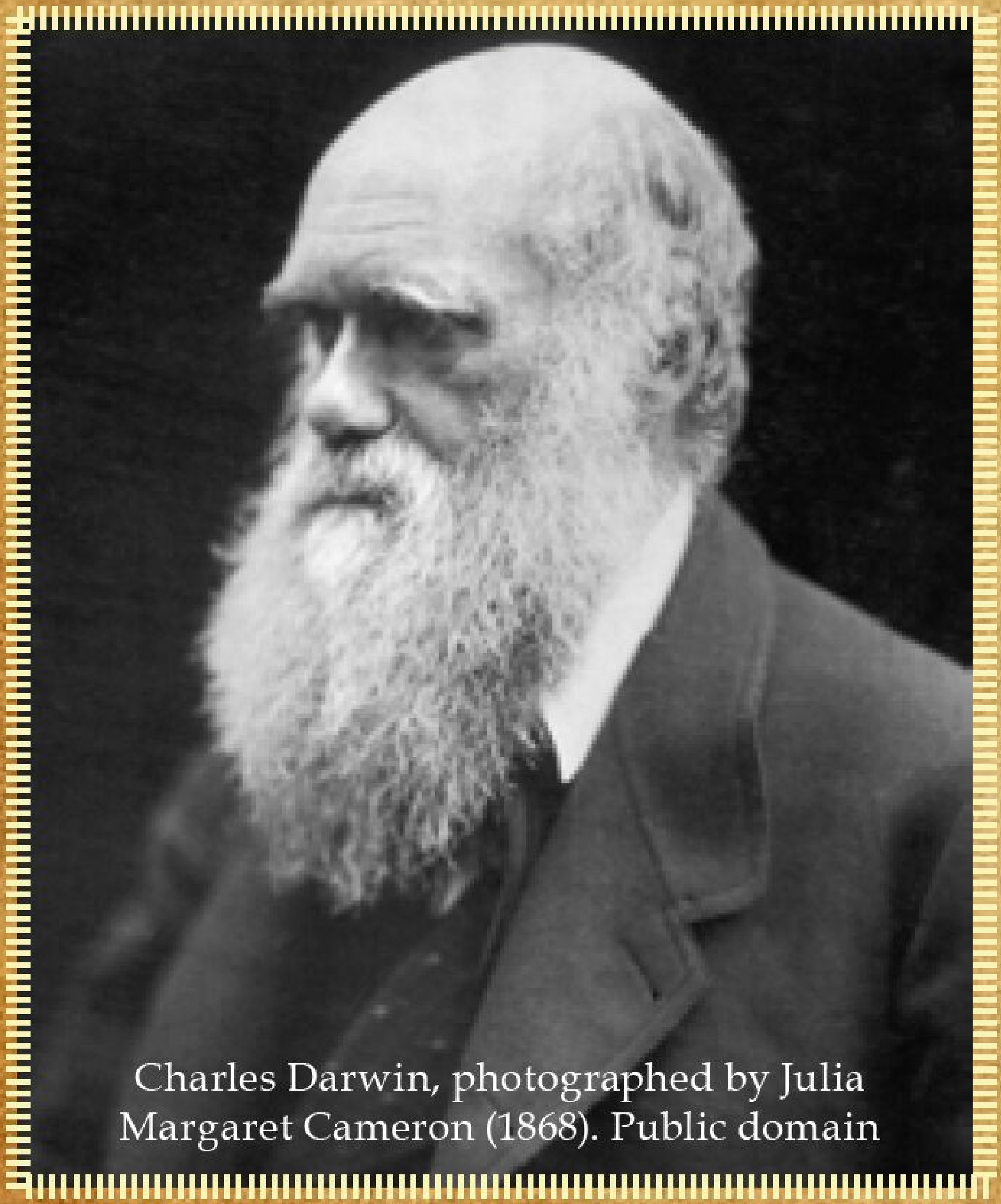
CHARLES DARWIN: TRANSFORMING NATURAL HISTORY THROUGH GROUNDBREAKING SCIENTIFIC DISCOVERY

By Jessica Nadeau



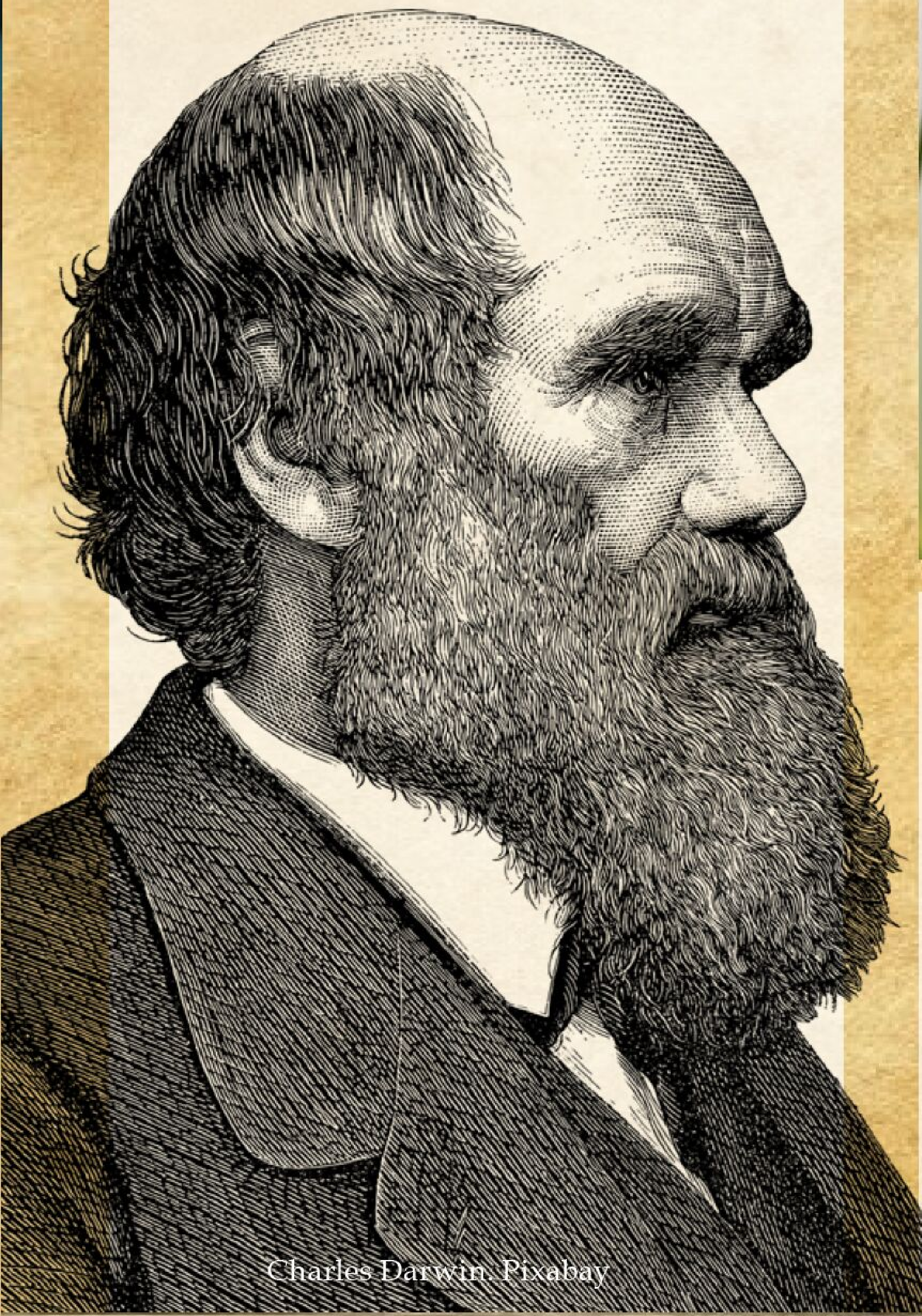
Charles Darwin, photographed by Julia Margaret Cameron (1868). Public domain

In the mid-19th century, the scientific world was entrenched in ideas about life on Earth that had remained largely unquestioned for centuries. Species were firmly believed to be fixed and unchanging. But this prevailing wisdom was about to be shattered by one man: Charles Darwin. His revolutionary theory of natural selection, presented in *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, forever changed our understanding of life's diversity. His journey of profound intellectual courage, personal struggles, and the relentless pursuit of truth makes him one of history's greatest scientific heroes, revolutionizing the study of human evolution and our origins as a species.

Charles Darwin was born in 1809 in Shrewsbury, England, into a prosperous and well-connected family. His father, Robert Darwin, was a physician, and his grandfather, Erasmus Darwin, was a well-known intellectual and proponent of evolutionary ideas. Though Darwin's early education was erratic—a seeming lack of interest in academics—his intellectual curiosity was unmistakable. Initially, Darwin was enrolled at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland, to study medicine but found himself repulsed by the brutal realities of surgery. Instead, he gravitated toward natural history, a field that would become his lifelong passion.

Darwin's decisive step into the world of scientific exploration came in 1831, when he embarked on a five-year voyage aboard the *HMS Beagle*, a British survey ship used for scientific research. The expedition, which took him to distant shores including the Galapagos Islands, was pivotal in shaping his understanding of the natural world. It was here, amidst the isolated volcanic islands, that Darwin made some of his most important observations.

The ship, under the command of Captain Robert FitzRoy, set sail from England in December 1831, with the mission of surveying the coast of South America. Darwin, just 22 years old at the time, was aboard as the ship's naturalist, responsible for documenting the various species encountered along the way.

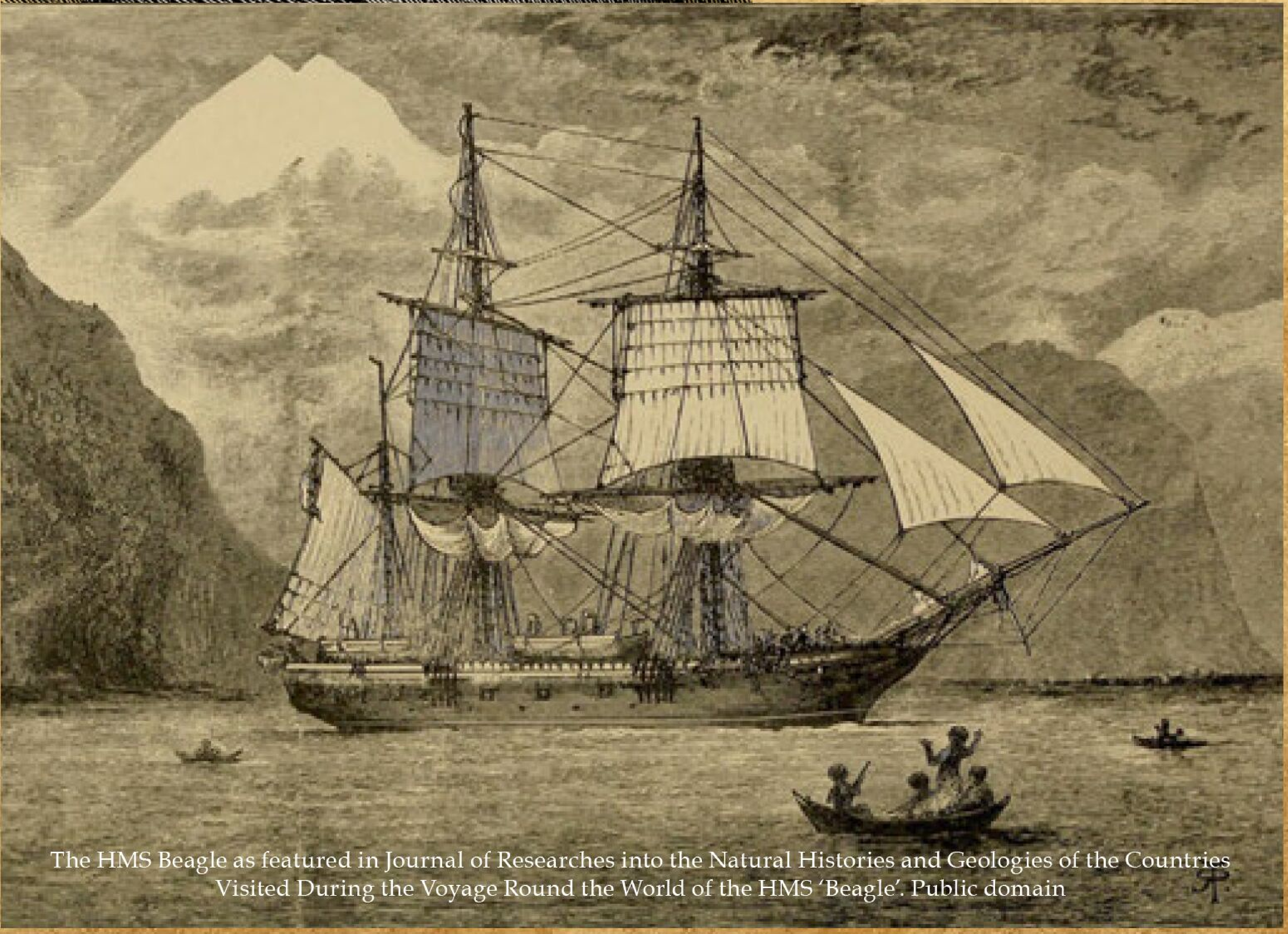

Charles Darwin. Pixabay

An example of finch bird. © Judy Gallagher / CC BY 2.0

The *Beagle* spent months navigating the coasts of South America, with Darwin meticulously collecting specimens and recording his observations in the ship's journal. The most exciting part of the journey, however, occurred when the ship reached the remote Galapagos Islands in 1835, an archipelago located about 600 miles west of Ecuador.

Intrigued by the mysterious variation he observed in species, Darwin took particular interest in the island's birds, specifically the finches. He noticed that, while the birds resembled each other in many ways, there were subtle differences between the islands. The most striking of these was the shape of their beaks, which seemed to be adapted to different foods. On one island, finches had large, sturdy beaks designed to crack hard seeds; on another, the beaks were smaller and more delicate, suited for catching insects. Darwin was intrigued.

The isolation of the Galapagos Islands allowed Darwin to consider the possibility that species were not fixed, as was commonly believed, but could change over time and be modified by their environment. His observations of the finches—along with other species like tortoises, which also varied from island to island—planted


The HMS Beagle as featured in Journal of Researches into the Natural Histories and Geologies of the Countries Visited During the Voyage Round the World of the HMS 'Beagle'. Public domain

View of Roca Leon Dormido. CC BY 2.0

the seeds for his later theory of natural selection.

Not immediately arriving at this conclusion, he was more preoccupied with cataloging the species and their peculiarities. In the months and years that followed, as he reviewed his specimens and compared them to those from other parts of the world, the idea of natural selection began to take shape in his mind.

Despite his accumulating evidence, Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection was revolutionary—and deeply controversial. The scientific consensus of the time was rooted in a belief that species were divinely created and remained unchanged. The idea of evolution, especially the notion that species could change over time through natural processes, was seen by many as dangerous and heretical. The concept of fixity of species was embedded not just in science but in theology, and challenging it meant questioning the very foundations of religious belief.

Even so, Darwin remained undeterred. He spent over two decades gathering evidence and refining his theory, a painstaking process of observation and correspondence with naturalists across the globe. His health, however, began to deteriorate during this time, possibly as a result of stress and his heavy workload. But his determination never wavered. Darwin believed so strongly in his theory that he would spend years investigating seemingly trivial questions—like whether seeds could survive the journey across the ocean, or whether small changes in animal populations might accumulate over generations to form new species.

While Darwin worked diligently, he hesitated to publish his theory, aware it would unleash a firestorm of debate by challenging long-held religious beliefs about creation. His young colleague Alfred Russel Wallace had already sent him a manuscript back in 1856 outlining remarkably similar findings. But upon reading another of Wallace's papers in June 1858—revealing that Wallace had independently arrived at the concept of natural selection—Darwin was simultaneously flattered and alarmed, finally realizing it was time to present his theory to the scientific community.

After consulting with his close friends, the renowned scientists Lyell and Hooker, Darwin agreed to have both Wallace's paper and a summary of his own research presented together at the Linnean Society of London. The presentation was a historic moment, but it barely made an impact. The scientific community was largely indifferent to the momentous nature of the theory that had just been introduced. To make matters worse, Darwin was unable to attend – his young son had succumbed to the scarlet fever that had been ravaging his village.

The real public storm began later that year, with the publication of *On the Origin of Species* in November 1859. In the book, Darwin laid out his argument—supported by years of data, observations, and experiments—that natural selection was the

mechanism behind the evolution of species. Darwin's theory of "descent with modification" was clear and concise, both simple and thought-provoking: all species share a common ancestor, and through the process of natural selection, advantageous traits become more common in a population over time, leading to the gradual emergence of new species.

Still, the response from the scientific community was mixed. The book sparked heated debates, and Darwin himself was largely absent from the fray due to his ill health. His theory was also met with fierce opposition from religious leaders who saw it as a direct challenge to the biblical account of creation.

One of the most notorious criticisms came from Samuel Wilberforce, the Bishop of Oxford, who publicly mocked Darwin's ideas during the famous 1860 debate at the British Association for the Advancement of Science. The bishop was met by Thomas Huxley's now-legendary retort: Huxley would rather be descended from an ape than from a man who misused his intellect.

This battle between science and religion played out in public forums, but Darwin's supporters were gaining ground. In 1864, Darwin wrote to his mentor and friend, Lyell: "*For myself, also, I rejoice profoundly; for thinking of the many cases of men pursuing an illusion for years, often & often a cold shudder has run through me & I have asked myself whether I may not have devoted my life to a phantasy. Now I look at it as morally impossible that investigators of truth like you & Hooker can be wholly wrong; & therefore I feel that I may rest in peace.*"

That same year, Darwin went on to receive the prestigious Copley Medal from the Royal Society, one of the highest honors in British science, cementing his position as a respected intellectual. Over the next decades, his theory gained increasing acceptance as more evidence—such as the discovery of fossils linking modern species with their ancestors—supported his findings.

Today, Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection is now universally accepted by the scientific community. His theory revolutionized biology, yet Darwin himself remained a quiet, reserved figure, dedicated to his work. His willingness to dispute prevailing notions, to put his theory to the test, and to continue his work despite enormous personal and professional setbacks, exemplifies the spirit of scientific inquiry. Though he did not seek glory, he ultimately became one of history's most influential thinkers, revolutionizing the study of natural history with his theory of evolution and natural selection and continuing to inspire and challenge the boundaries of human knowledge. ■

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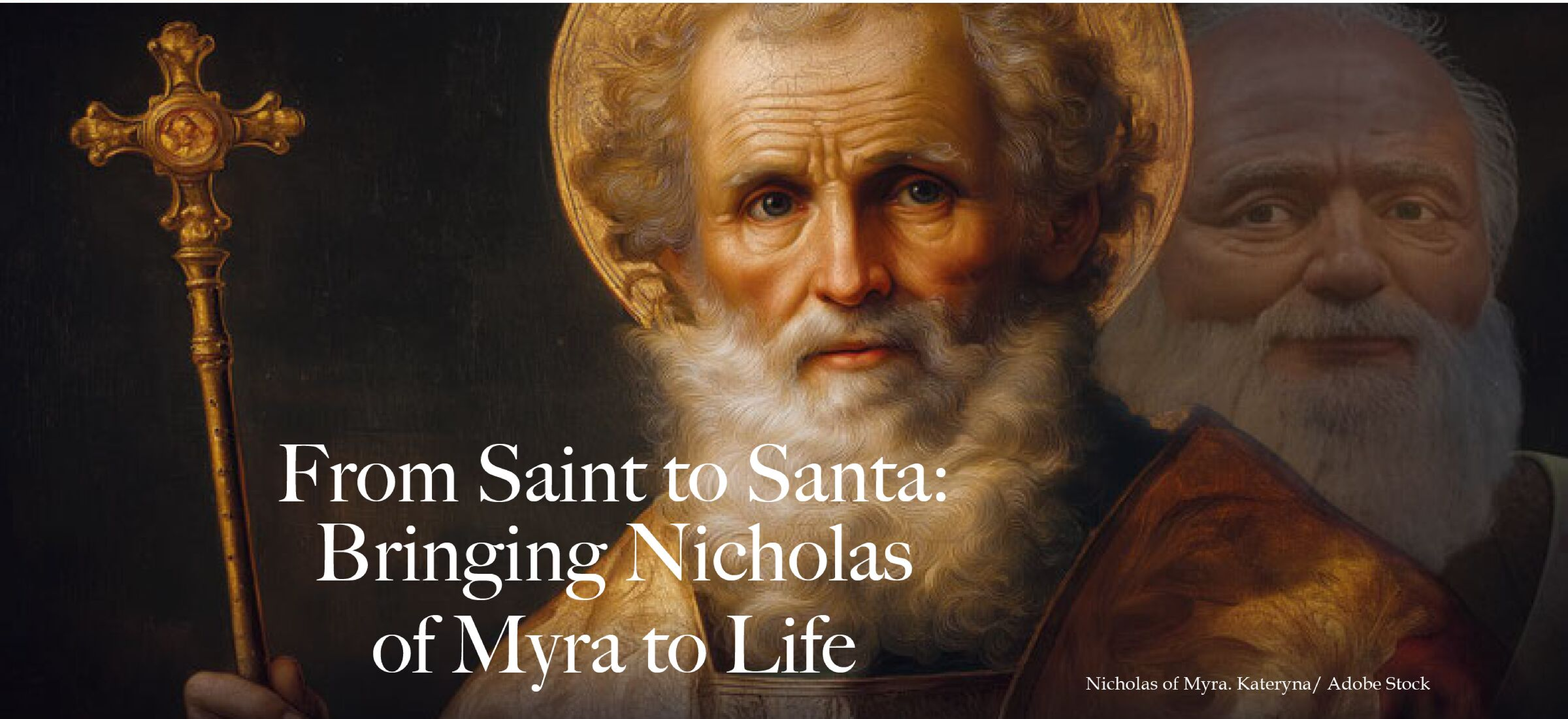
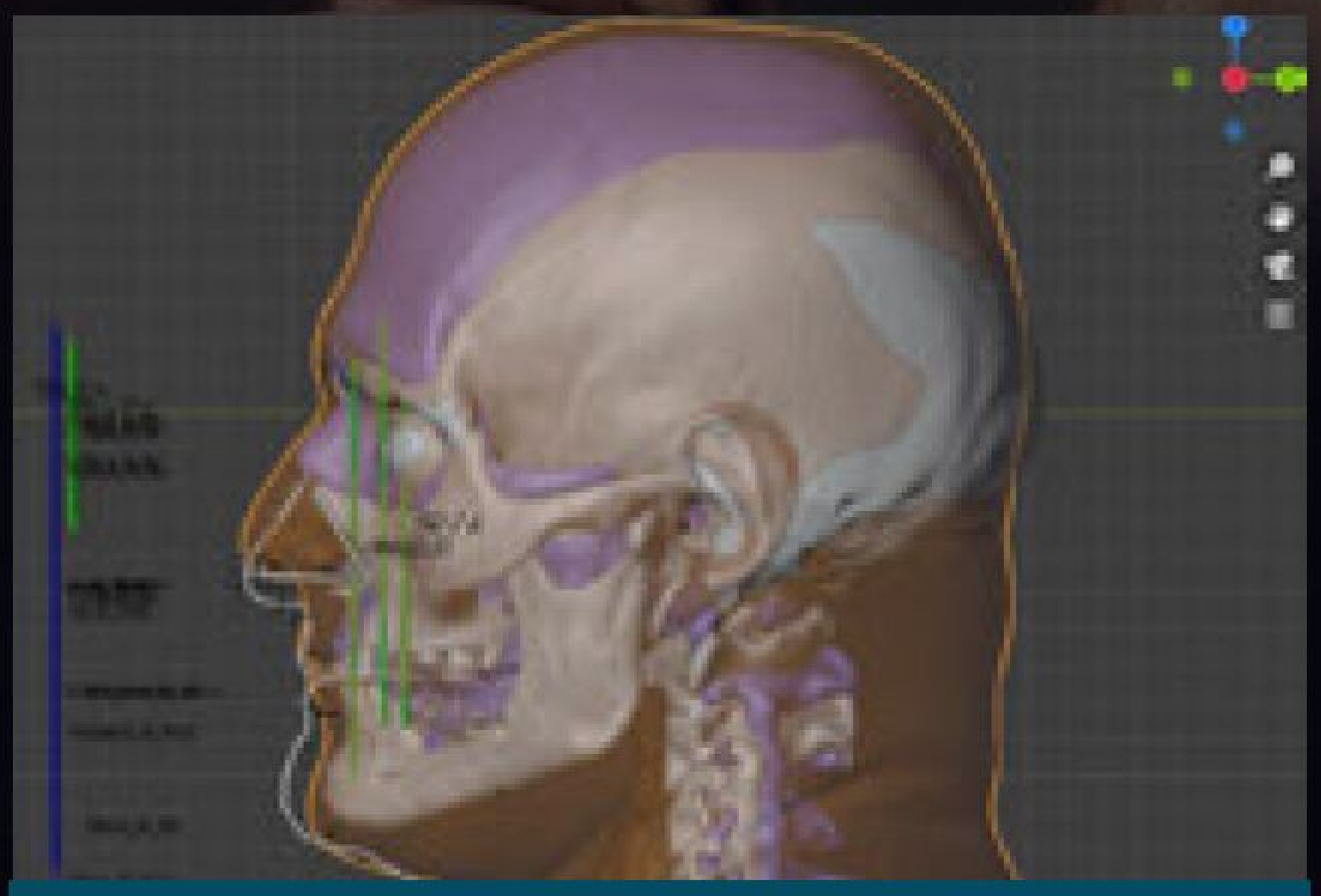
The Science and Art of Facial Reconstruction

With Cícero Moraes

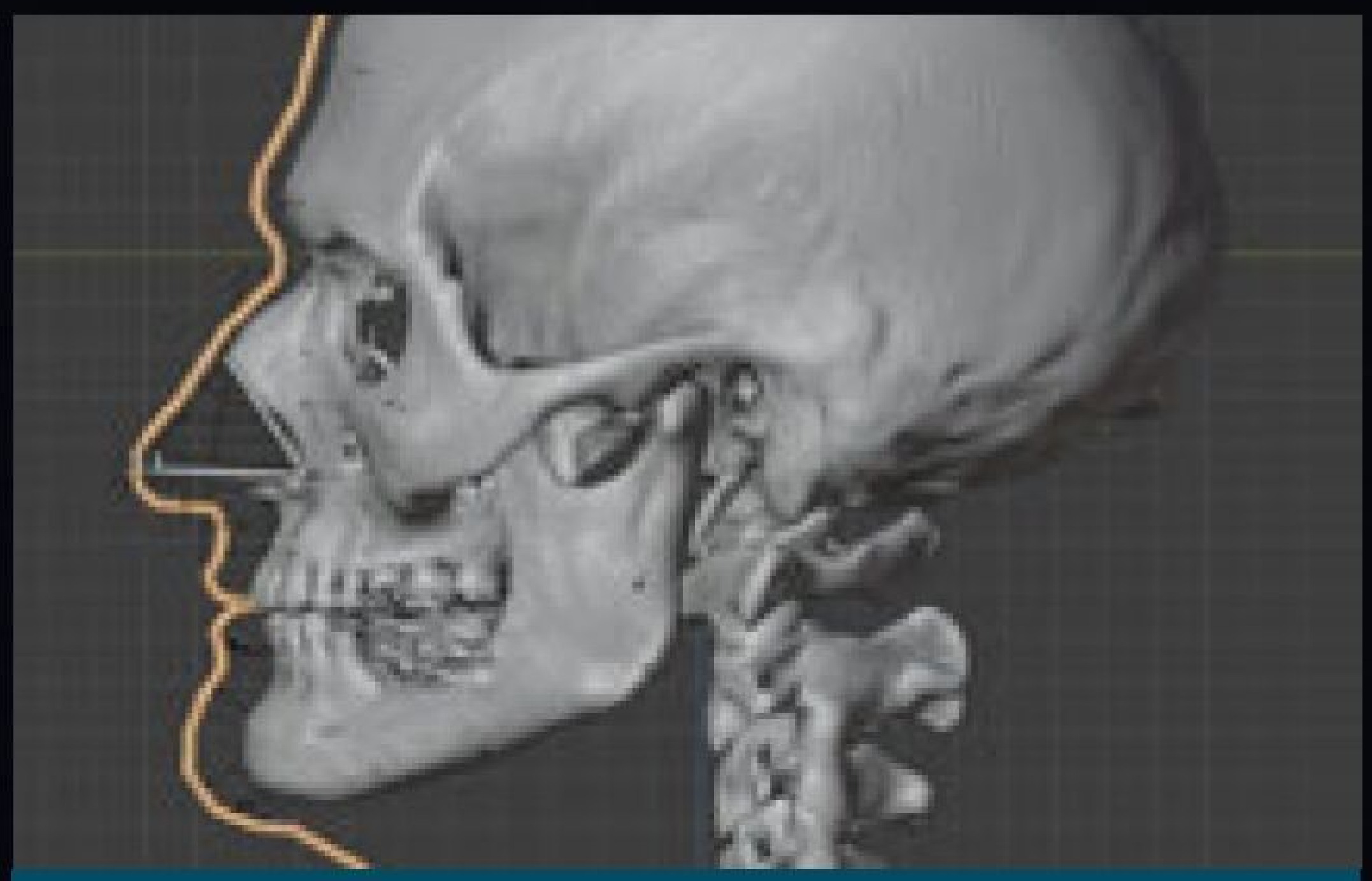


From Saint to Santa: Bringing Nicholas of Myra to Life

Nicholas of Myra. Kateryna/ Adobe Stock



Adding in data from virtual donor mesh. Courtesy of Cícero Moraes



Markers of soft tissue thickness, nasal projection, and facial profile. Courtesy of Cícero Moraes

Almost everyone has heard of Santa Claus. Yet, few know the history behind this saintly figure or the so-called heist that sought to claim his skeletal remains. Now, 1,700 years after the death of the man who inspired the legend, efforts to reconstruct his face are reviving these long-forgotten stories.

Despite his status as one of the most recognizable figures in popular imagination, there are no contemporary depictions of the face of Saint Nicholas of Myra. Born a Greek Christian around 270 AD in Patara—near the modern-day town of Gelemiş in Turkey, he later became the Bishop of nearby Myra, where his remains were originally interred.

Imprisoned for his faith during the famous persecution of Christians under Diocletian, Nicholas is often depicted in his bishop's cloak. He is remembered for his work aiding the poor and his secret gift-giving, acts that have fueled the myths surrounding Santa Claus. One story tells of him anonymously paying the dowries of three girls, thereby saving them from prostitution, while others describe him leaving coins in the shoes of those in need. Canonized after his death and celebrated on December 6, Saint Nicholas is venerated as the

Faces of History is an exclusive new feature in *Ancient Origins Magazine*, where we will collaborate with the acclaimed historical facial reconstruction expert Cícero Moraes. Known for his unparalleled skill in bringing ancient figures back to life, Moraes will guide readers on a captivating journey through time. Each issue will feature his meticulous reconstructions and include his voice and research, offering deeper insights into the intricate blend of science, art, and history that fuels this fascinating work—bringing us face to face with people of the past.

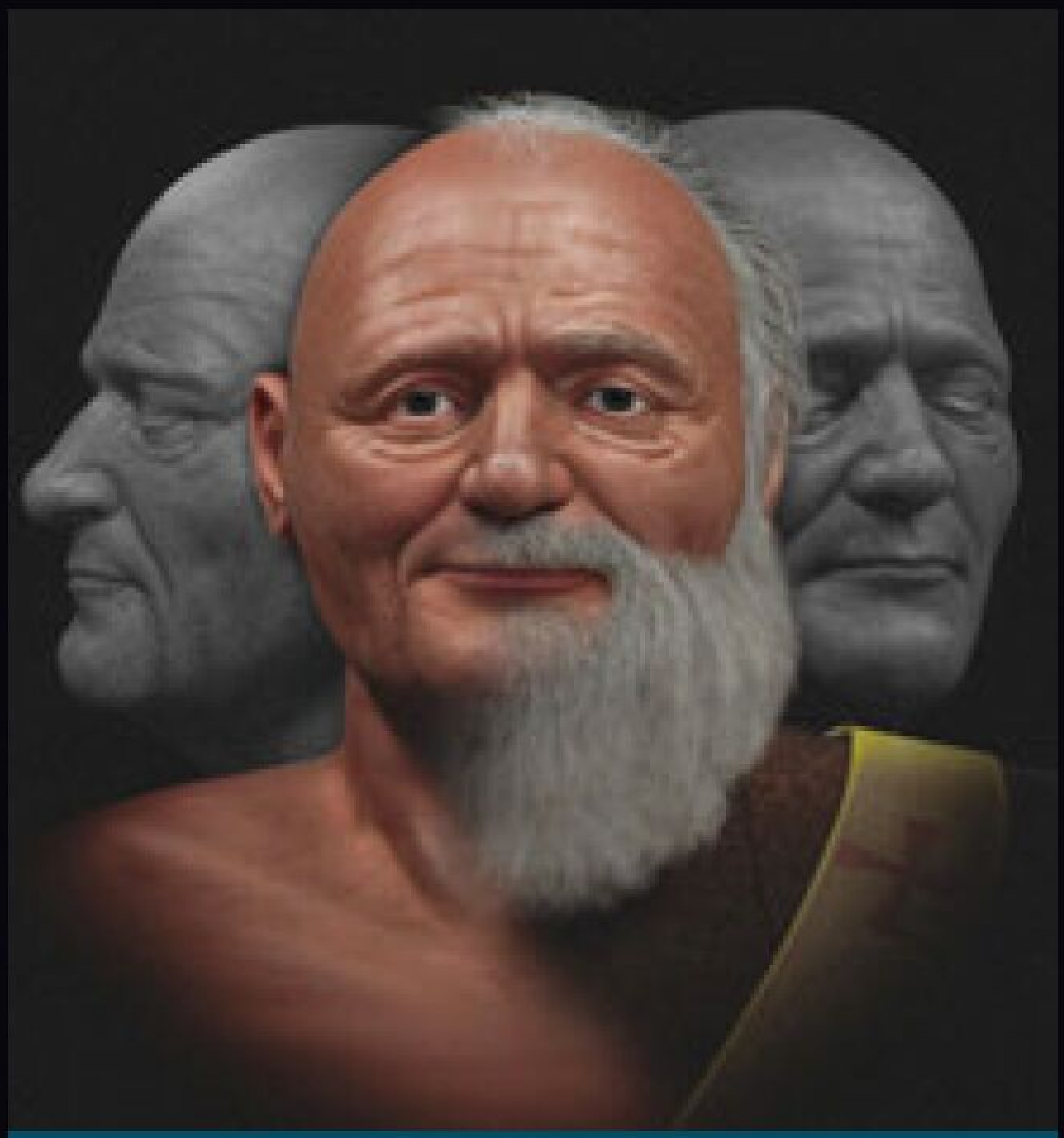
By Cecilia Bogaard

patron saint of children, sailors, and merchants.

Stories of his generosity inspired the legend of Sinterklaas, a central figure in Dutch and Belgian culture celebrated as a generous bishop arriving by boat from Spain to reward well-behaved children with gifts, traditionally placed in their shoes. Over time, some of these traditions shifted to Christmas Eve, influenced by Martin Luther of the Protestant Reformation, who sought to redirect attention to the celebration of Christ. As European traditions reached North America, Sinterklaas evolved, adopting flying reindeer and North Pole lore to become today's Santa Claus.

Representational image of Nicholas of Myra, depicted in his bishop's cloak. Elizaveta/ Adobe Stock

There's a lesser-known side to Saint Nicholas's story, one that remains absent from the familiar corpus of Christmas mythology. Reimagined in the 2024 historical fantasy *Nicked* by M. T. Anderson, it recounts a daring plot to steal the saint's bones from their crypt in Myra in 1087. As improbable as it sounds, this tale is actually grounded in historical events.



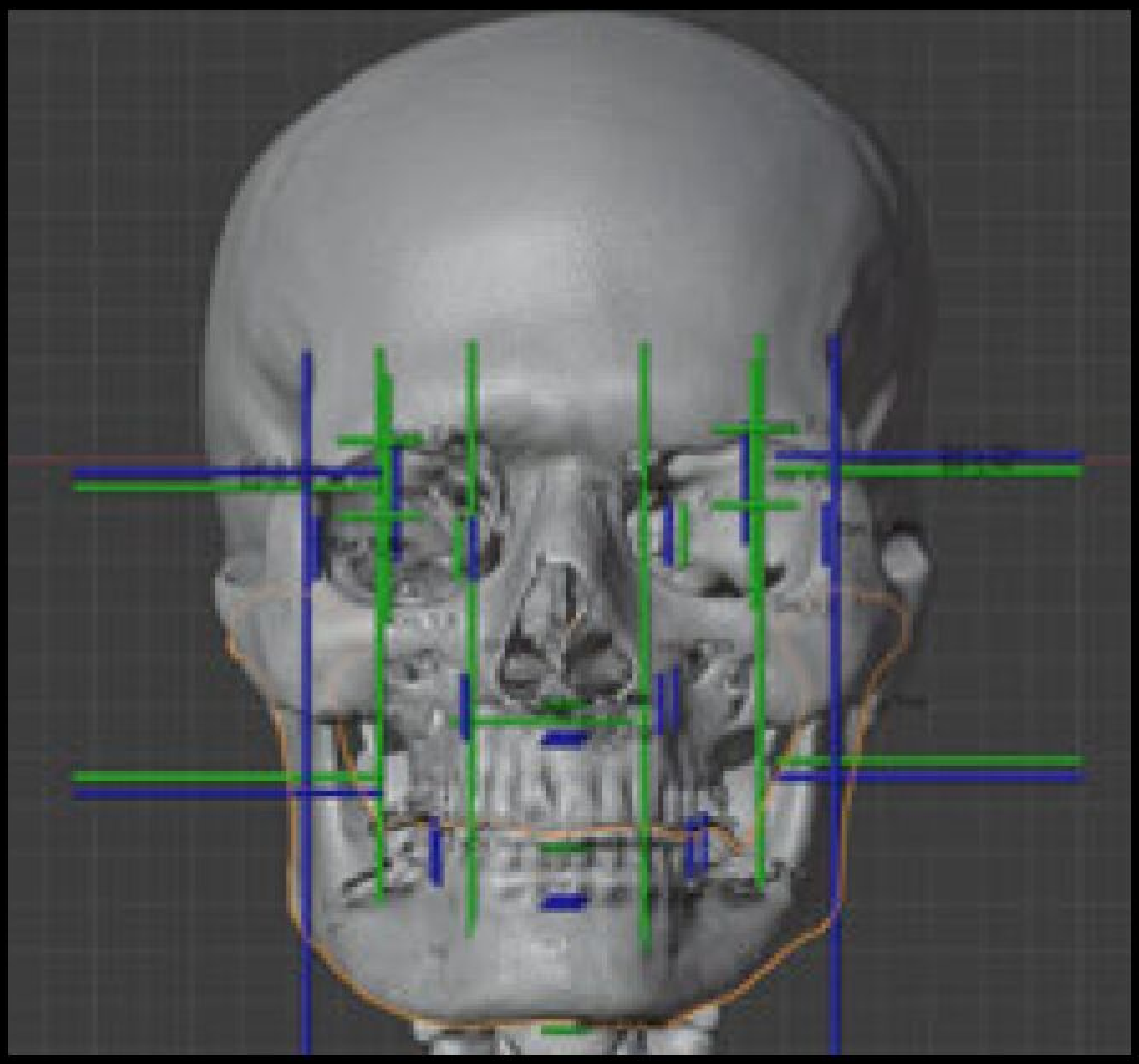
Facial reconstruction steps of Saint Nicholas of Myra by Cícero Moraes. Courtesy of Cícero Moraes.

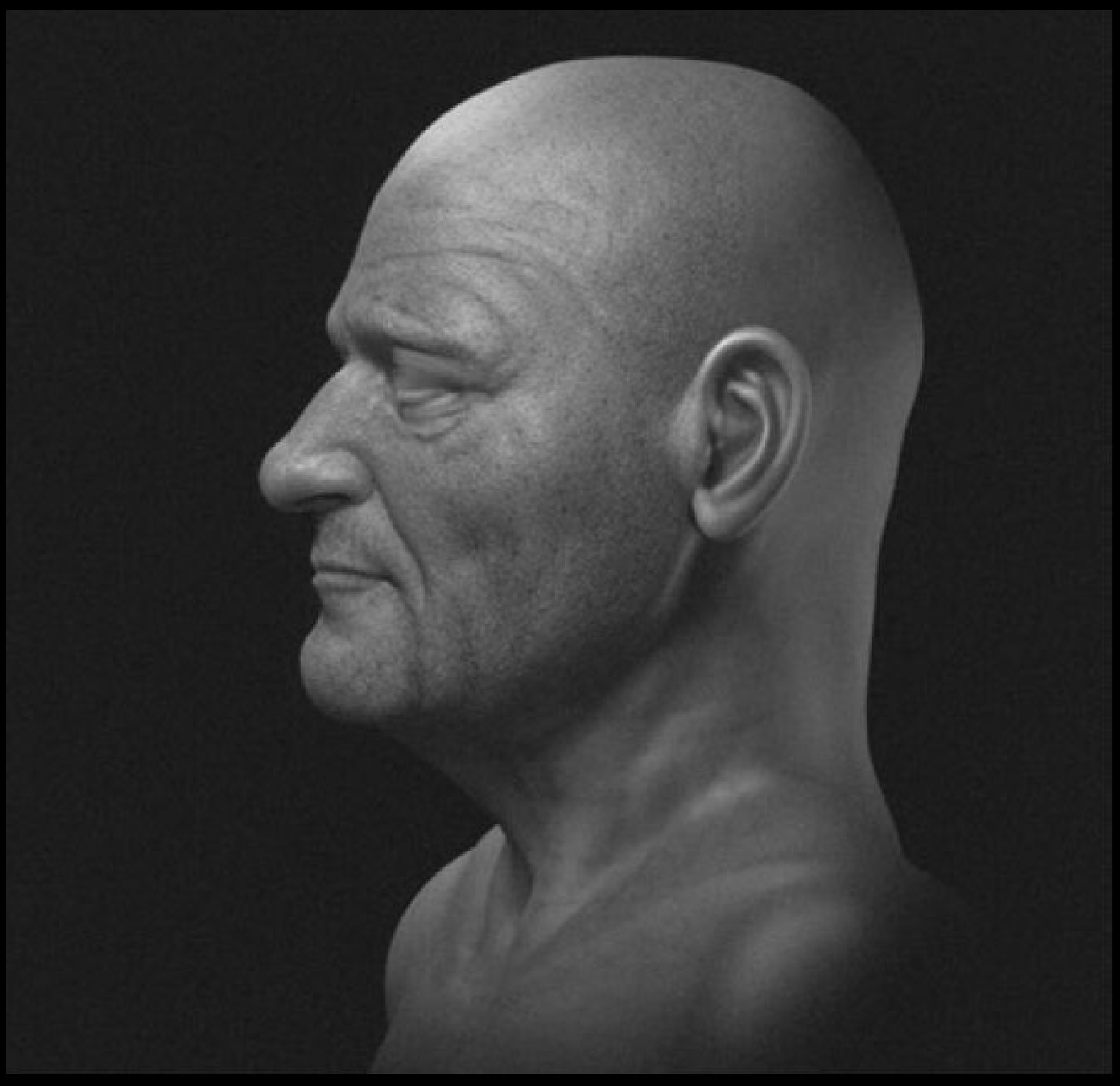
For centuries, Saint Nicholas's skeletal remains were believed to exude a rose-scented liquid known as *manna*, thought to have healing powers. When Myra fell under Seljuk Turkish control, a race began to rescue—or steal—these relics from the Church of St. Nicholas built above his tomb. In 1087, merchants from Bari, in southern Italy, took most of the major bones, including the skull. These relics were enshrined in the Basilica di San Nicola, where the manna is still celebrated on May 9, during the Feast of Translation, to be distributed to believers.

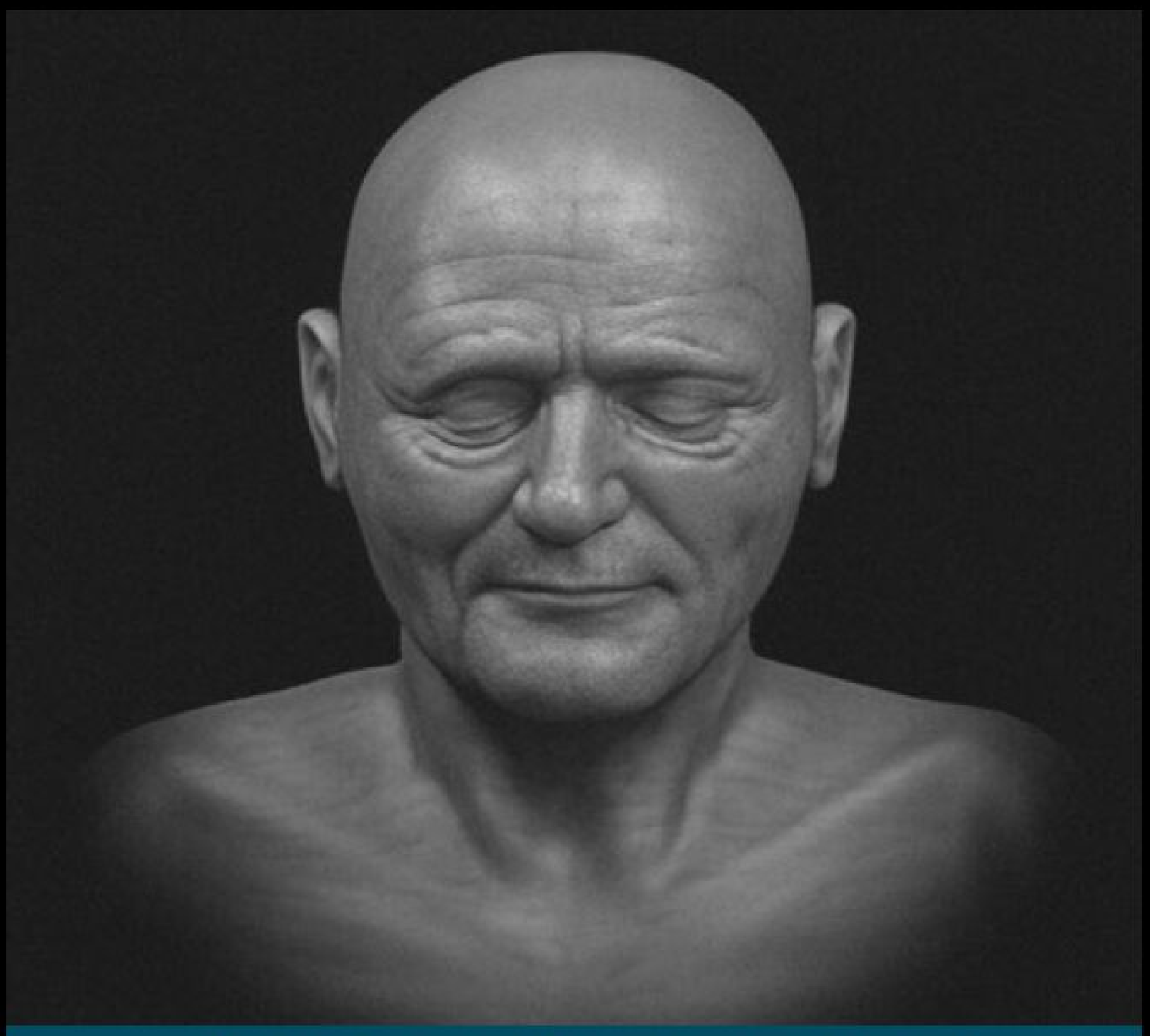
Meanwhile, in 1099, during the First Crusade, Venetian sailors took the remaining bones to Venice, where they are still housed at San Nicolò al Lido, drawing their own share of devotees. All that was left in Myra was a vandalized sarcophagus—a stark reminder of the lengths taken to secure these sacred relics and the efforts to draw pilgrims to the sanctuaries that preserved them.

In the 1950s, the crypt at Bari's Basilica di San Nicola was reopened due to water damage, giving Italian anatomy professor Dr. Luigi Martino the opportunity to study the partial remains of Saint Nicholas. His analysis, which included metric data and measurements, revealed a man of average height with a wide face, prominent cheekbones, and a nose that showed evidence of being broken.

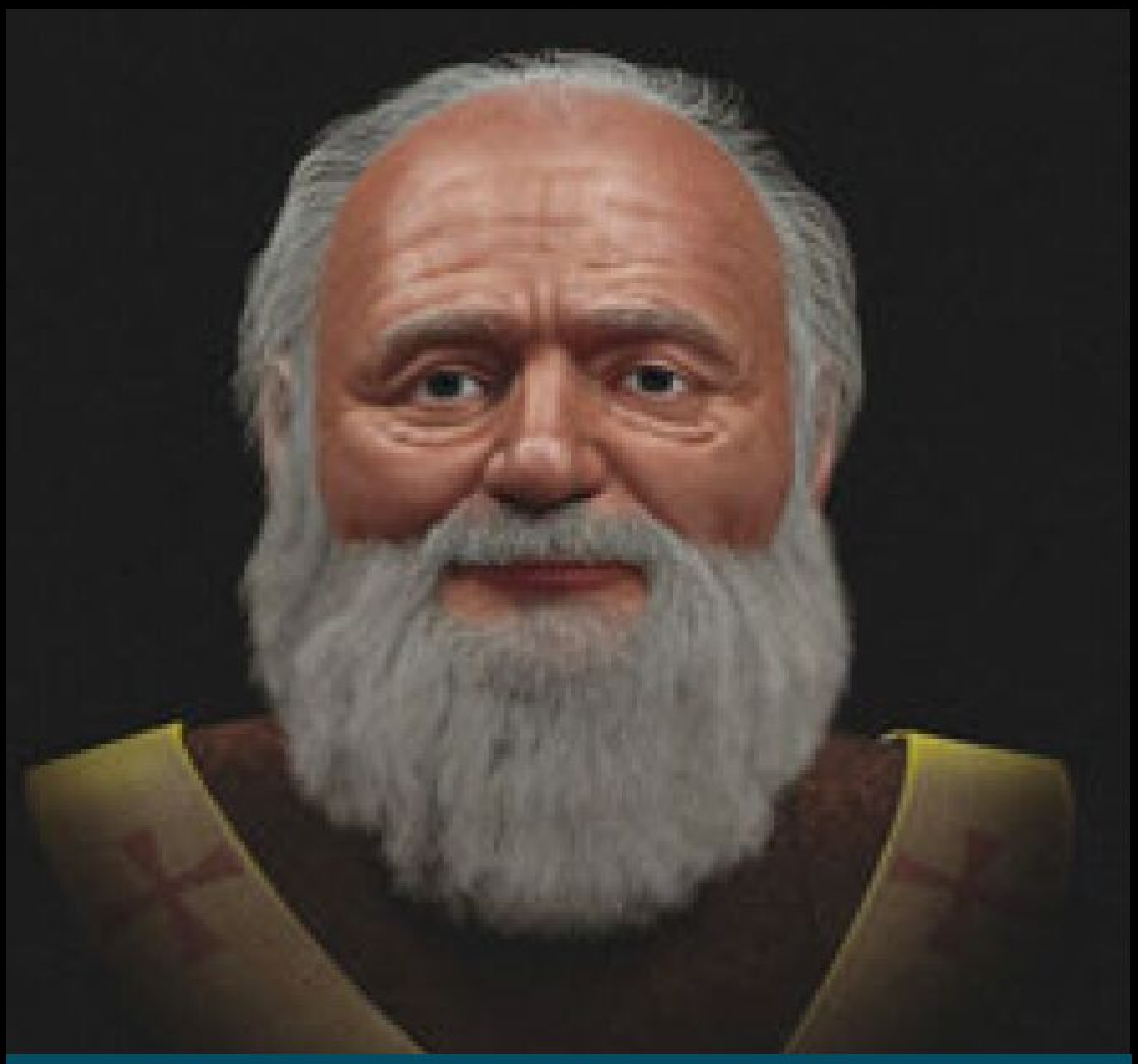
Building on Martino's findings—







Objective grayscale reconstruction of Saint Nicholas of Myra.



Color version of facial reconstruction of Saint Nicholas, incorporating subjective details such as skin tone, hair, and eye color. All pictures above Courtesy of Cícero Moraes

as well as more recent efforts to envision Saint Nicholas's appearance—Brazilian forensic specialist Cícero Moraes launched a personal project in late 2024 to digitally reconstruct the saint's face. He collaborated with historian José Luís Lira, an expert on saints, and Dr. Thiago Beaini, a professor specializing in forensic dentistry. Together, they reconstructed the skull in 3D using available data, applied statistical projections and anatomical deformation techniques to estimate soft tissue structure.

The result features two sets of facial reconstructions published in *OrtogOnLineMag*: one objective grayscale image emphasizing anatomical accuracy and a color version incorporating subjective details such as skin tone, hair, and eye color. The latter bears a striking resemblance to the cherished figure of Santa Claus, said to visit children from his North Pole workshop each year. "In our colored version, we sought to respect the structures of the iconography attributed to him," Moraes explained. The reconstructions garnered global attention, with widespread coverage in the international press.

While tales of relic thefts and a long-dead saint may seem distant to many, for others, the question of his remains holds profound importance, continuing to inspire pilgrims from around the world. The chance to come face to face with the saint—whether through his relics or his reconstructed likeness—offers a unique opportunity to connect with a figure whose legacy has shaped centuries of tradition and continues to resonate deeply in both history, faith, and popular culture. "This work demonstrates the complex layers behind a legendary figure so central to Christmas," Moraes added. "It's a way to connect history with those curious about it, in a transparent and accessible way." ■

Church of Saint Nicholas in Demre Danicha / Adobe Stock

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UNLOCKING THE PAS

Courtesy of Stephen Parsons

In the 18th century, archaeologists unearthed a trove of ancient knowledge in the ruins of Herculaneum, a town buried under volcanic ash during Mount Vesuvius's catastrophic eruption in 79 AD. Among the discoveries were fragile papyri, blackened and fused into carbonized lumps by the intense heat. These scrolls, believed to contain invaluable insights into the ancient world, remained tantalizingly out of reach for decades—too delicate to unroll, let alone decipher.

That began to change with the advent of artificial intelligence. Brent Seales, a computer scientist leading the University of Kentucky's Digital Restoration Initiative, developed an AI-powered program capable of virtually unwrapping the scrolls and revealing their long-hidden texts. Combining advanced imaging techniques such as X-ray phase-contrast tomography with machine learning algorithms and customized optical character recognition, his work transformed these sealed relics into accessible archives of history.

In 2023, Seales teamed up with tech entrepreneurs Nat Friedman and Daniel Gross to launch the Vesuvius Challenge, an ambitious effort to accelerate the decryption of the scrolls. Using high-resolution CT scans generated by a Diamond Light Source particle accelerator, they incentivized global participation with financial rewards for breakthroughs. This collaborative effort has already borne fruit, but as Stephen Parsons, the current Project Lead, explains, the race to decode the past is far from over.

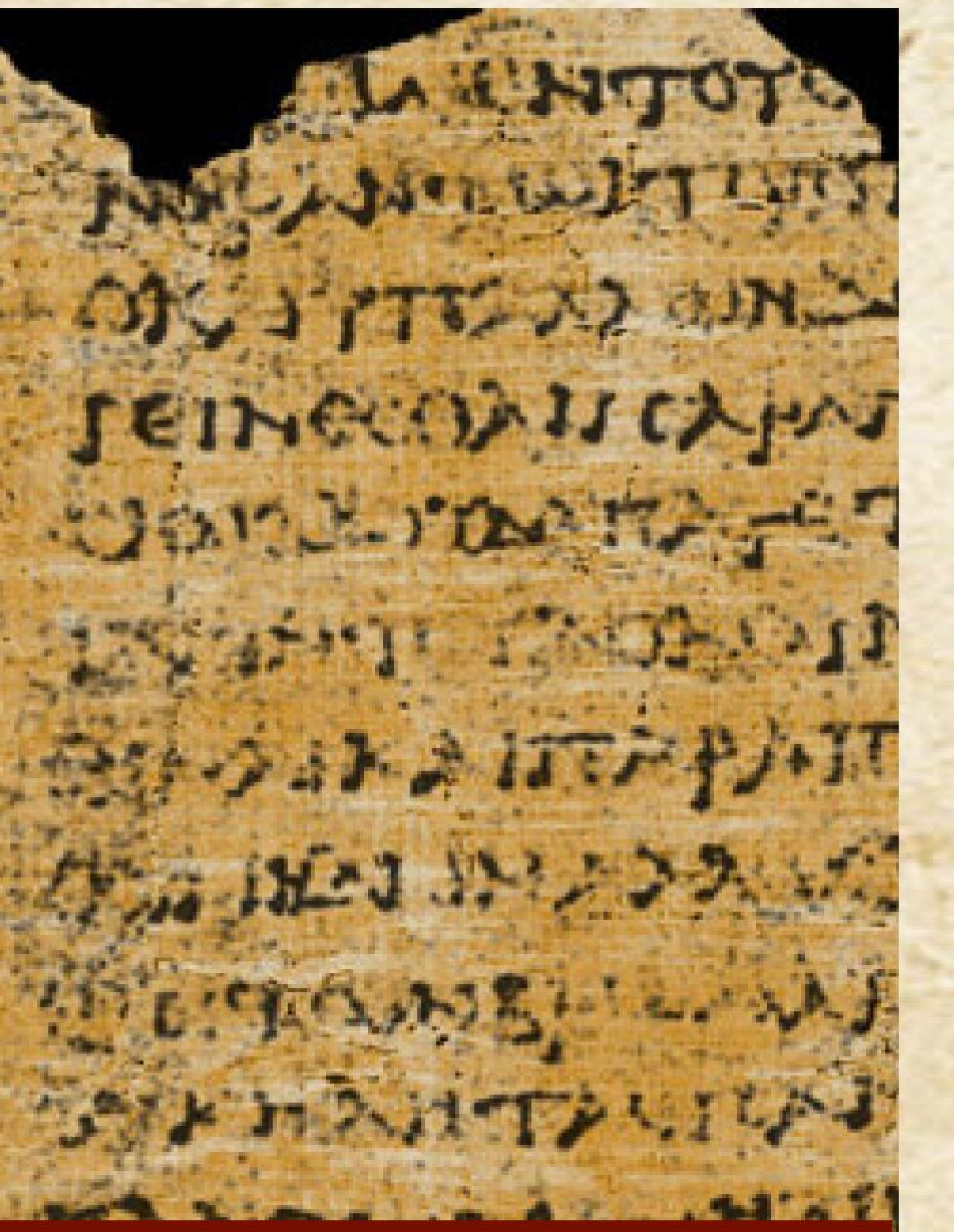
Q: How would you explain the Vesuvius Challenge and the concept of virtual unwrapping to someone unfamiliar with it?

Stephen: We're trying to read ancient scrolls, buried in the year 79 AD by Mount Vesuvius in Herculaneum, Italy, that are so charred and brittle that they fall apart when you try to open them physically. So, instead, we put them in a CT scanner and image them with X-rays. But even after we have X-ray images of the insides of the scrolls, a large challenge remains to virtually unwrap them.

We have to trace the complex shapes of the papyrus sheets of the scroll inside the CT scan—made difficult because the scrolls were crushed and crumpled in addition to being

Stephen Parsons on the Vesuvius Challenge and the Race to Read the Scrolls

By Cecilia Bogaard



Courtesy of Vesuvius Challenge

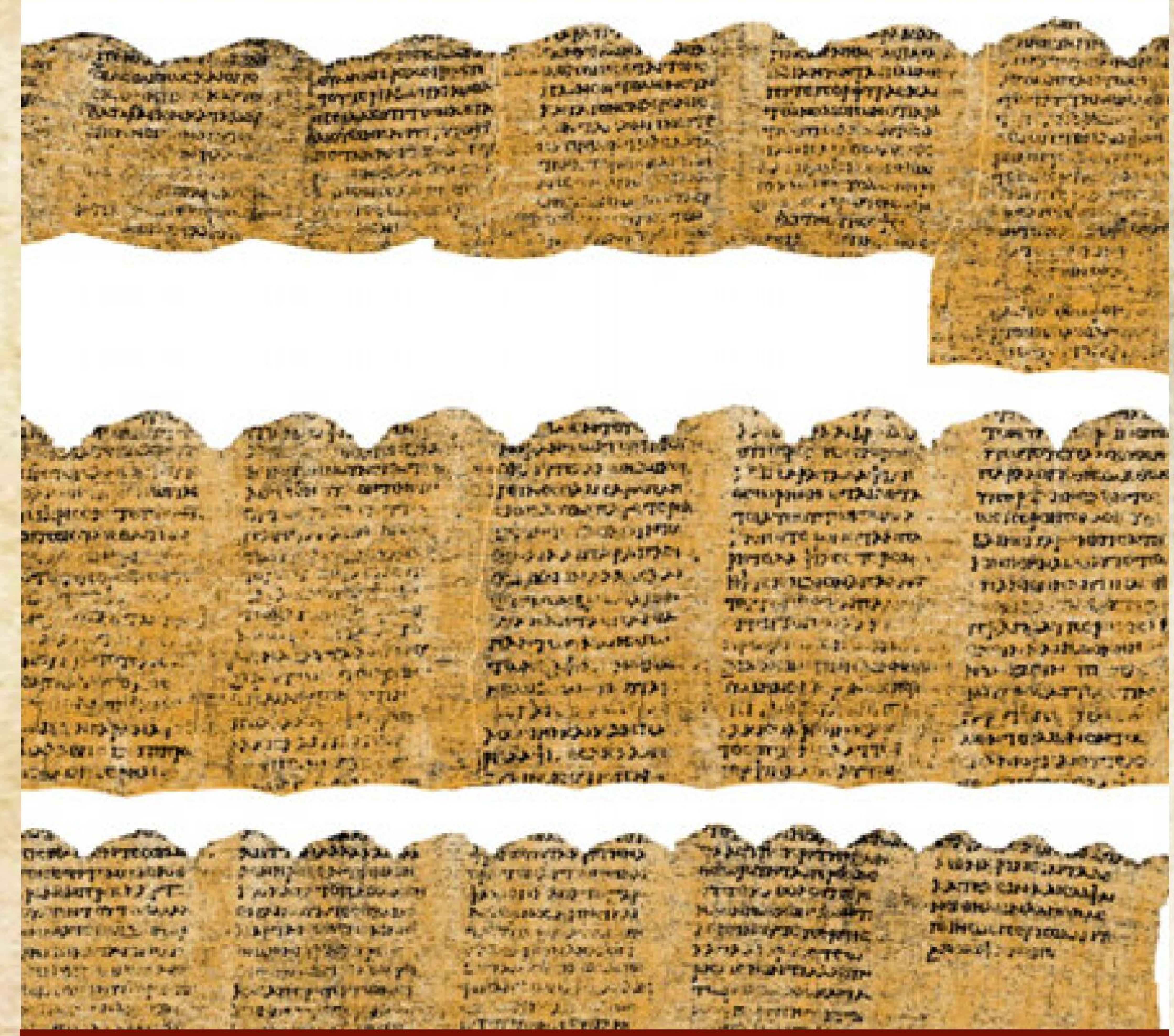
carbonized. Once we've done that, we have to use machine learning and other image processing in order to reveal where on the surface we can detect ink. The output is a digital image showing the text from inside the scroll, which remains sealed in real life! We've made great progress on these problems, and have recovered some text from the scrolls, but much work remains to read the entire library.

Vesuvius Challenge is a worldwide effort to solve this research problem and recover the hidden texts of the Herculaneum library. We have released CT scans of scrolls to the internet and invited anyone in the world to contribute towards various milestones.

Vesuvius Challenge is a worldwide effort to solve this research problem and recover the hidden texts of the Herculaneum library. We have released CT scans of scrolls to the internet and invited anyone in the world to contribute towards various milestones. We've awarded over $1 million in prizes and made history by recovering the first passages from sealed Herculaneum scrolls!

Q: When did you first become involved with the Vesuvius Challenge, and what drew you to the project?

Stephen: I've been working on manuscripts since 2014, when I was an undergraduate



The result image produced by the Vesuvius Challenge Grand Prize winning team of Youssef Nader, Luke Farritor, and Julian Schilliger, which revealed 15 columns of Greek text.
Courtesy of Vesuvius Challenge

The charred Herculaneum scroll deciphered during the Vesuvius Challenge. Courtesy of EduceLab, University of Kentucky

in Dr. Brent Seales' computer science lab at the University of Kentucky. After graduating and working elsewhere, I came back to his lab to complete my PhD (largely focused on the Herculaneum scrolls). I've been a part of Vesuvius Challenge since we launched it in March 2023 in partnership with Nat Friedman and Daniel Gross. I've always been drawn to the Herculaneum scrolls in particular: on top of their incredible historical significance, the technical challenge so perfectly toes the line of near-impossibility. It's so compelling—we have to solve it!

The charred Herculaneum scroll. Courtesy of EduceLab, University of Kentucky

Q: When did you take on the role of Project Lead, and how has that shaped the challenge's direction?

Stephen: I've been the Project Lead for Vesuvius Challenge since my marvelous predecessor JP Posma moved on to pursue other opportunities. This past year we've expanded the effort, hiring a small in-house research team to support the project in addition to the community contributions we receive from our amazing contestants around the world.

Q: Is Brent Seales still actively contributing to the project, or has his focus shifted elsewhere?

Stephen: Brent remains heavily involved as a cofounder of Vesuvius Challenge! This work requires the close collaboration and support of both him and his lab, as well as their partners: libraries, scholars, conservators, physicists, and so on. It would be impossible without them.

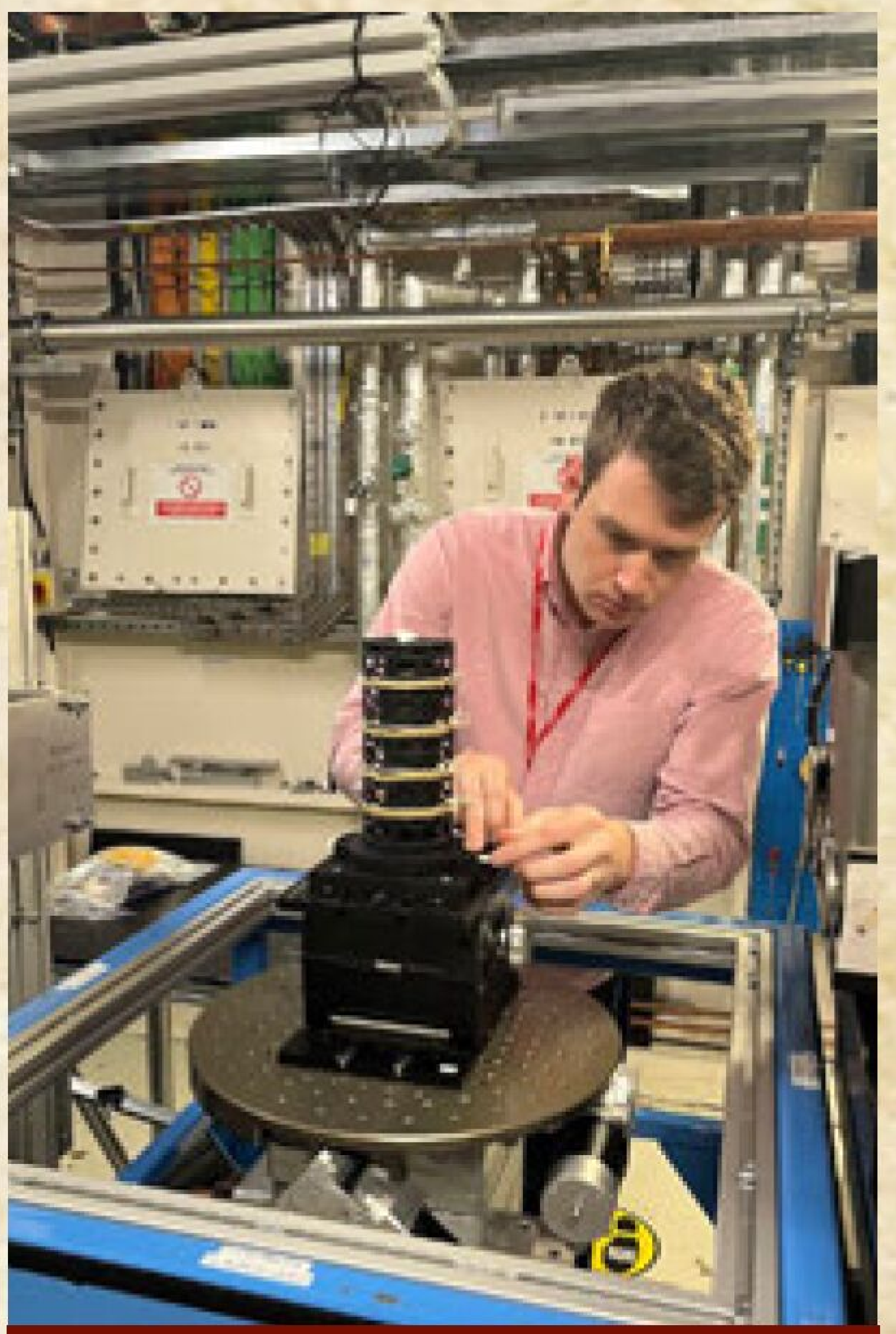
Q: How did your experience as a computer scientist shape your contributions to the Vesuvius Challenge?

Stephen: This effort is a huge one, and there are many angles from which contributions can be made. It has been helpful for me to focus my attention on one area where I feel we can move the needle. One way I look at this is: how can we maximize the information we can extract from these CT scans? Another way to put it is that we are focused on the software side of the problem. While we develop our methods, physicists are improving the imaging technology, computer engineers are building ever bigger and better computers, and machine learning experts are developing new fundamental tools that we are able to use. Every one of these areas has seen improvements since I have started working with these scrolls, and it's all necessary to solve the problem!

> **Seeing the Herculaneum scrolls in person is a humbling experience. It is hard to believe we have the opportunity to work with materials that were created by human hands thousands of years ago, and that contain secrets we are starting to tease out.**

Q: What was your most significant contribution to the software used for virtually unwrapping these ancient texts?

Stephen: My dissertation focused on what we call the "ink detection problem." Since these scrolls are made of carbonized papyrus, and are written using carbon-based lamp black ink (essentially made of soot), the papyrus sheet and the ink are both primarily made of carbon—meaning they appear as the same shade of gray in X-ray. So even after we virtually unwrap a sheet from inside the scroll, we are often presented with what looks like a blank sheet. We developed methods to detect the ink nonetheless using machine learning—it's not actually "invisible" in X-ray as previously thought, it's just very subtle. By training models using the known location of ink, we can build tools that can detect the ink from inside complete scrolls. We started this approach using lab-made scrolls and then small scroll fragments that had detached from the larger, complete rolls. Now, these methods have been extended to recover complete passages from intact scrolls.


Stephen Parsons scanning a scroll.
Courtesy of Stephen Parsons

Q: Why is deciphering the Herculaneum scrolls considered such a formidable technical challenge?

Stephen: A large reason I find this work so compelling is that it is at the limit of feasibility in just about every way. We can only barely acquire the X-ray images at the extremely high resolution we need, and we need a particle accelerator facility to do it. Tracing the sheets and unwrapping the scrolls is very difficult, as papyrus is a complex material, and hundreds of layers of it are smashed and crumpled together in a single scroll. Then, we get to the ink detection problem! Plus, all of this is happening on X-ray images that are each multiple terabytes. Together it makes for a real challenge. I think I'm not alone in finding this really fun!

With virtual unwrapping, we can experiment and improve our methods without any damage to the artifact—once the methods are perfected, the text that is revealed at the end will be much cleaner and more complete than has ever been possible otherwise.

Q: Have you seen the Herculaneum scrolls in person, and if so, how did that experience resonate with you?

Stephen: Seeing the Herculaneum scrolls in person is a humbling experience. It is hard to believe we have the opportunity to work with materials that were created by human hands thousands of years ago, and that contain secrets we are starting to tease out. It is astonishing how small some of them are, especially the detached scroll fragments that we use to develop our methods before applying them to complete scrolls. I've spent months becoming intimately familiar with the papyrus fibers of a scroll piece, learning my way around it like a landscape. It's wild after doing this to see it in person and be reminded that the entire piece is smaller than a thumbnail! Fortunately, it is not my job to handle

Stephen Parsons at work. Courtesy of EduceLab

the scrolls—we let the conservators do that!

Q: How do you see virtual unwrapping transforming archaeology, heritage science, and the study of ancient manuscripts?

Stephen: We're excited about noninvasive imaging and virtual unwrapping not just because they can help us recover otherwise hidden texts, but because they will be able to do so better than is possible with other methods. In the case of the Herculaneum scrolls, scholars have been able to read some of the scrolls for many years, because they were opened physically. But doing so left a trail of destruction—scrolls were turned into many hundreds or thousands of pieces, leaving a complicated 3D jigsaw puzzle for scholars today. Much text was lost forever. And what is left is often fragmentary and broken. With virtual unwrapping, we can experiment and improve our methods without any damage to the artifact—once the methods are perfected, the text that is revealed at the end will be much cleaner and more complete than has ever been possible otherwise.

Q: How many contestants participated in the 2024 Vesuvius Challenge, and what can you tell us about their profiles?

Stephen: We have around 4,000 members on our Discord server, and received over 1,000 team submissions to a machine learning competition that we ran at the beginning of Vesuvius Challenge. We've paid prizes to contributions made from people in at least 19 countries! Many university students have participated, but also high schoolers, professionals, and everything in between.

Q: What do you think motivates such a diverse group of people to participate?

Stephen: Our job is to "nerd snipe" people from around the world to help us work on this amazing problem—getting them hooked on it so that they, like us, can't sleep until we've solved it. Fortunately for us, the combined historical and technical nature of the problem make this pretty easy. Once someone understands the challenge and realizes they can play a role in the process—potentially being the first human in 2,000 years to see some text—they become obsessed just like we are. Contributors to the project share an interest in our common human history and in using the amazing technology of today to understand it.

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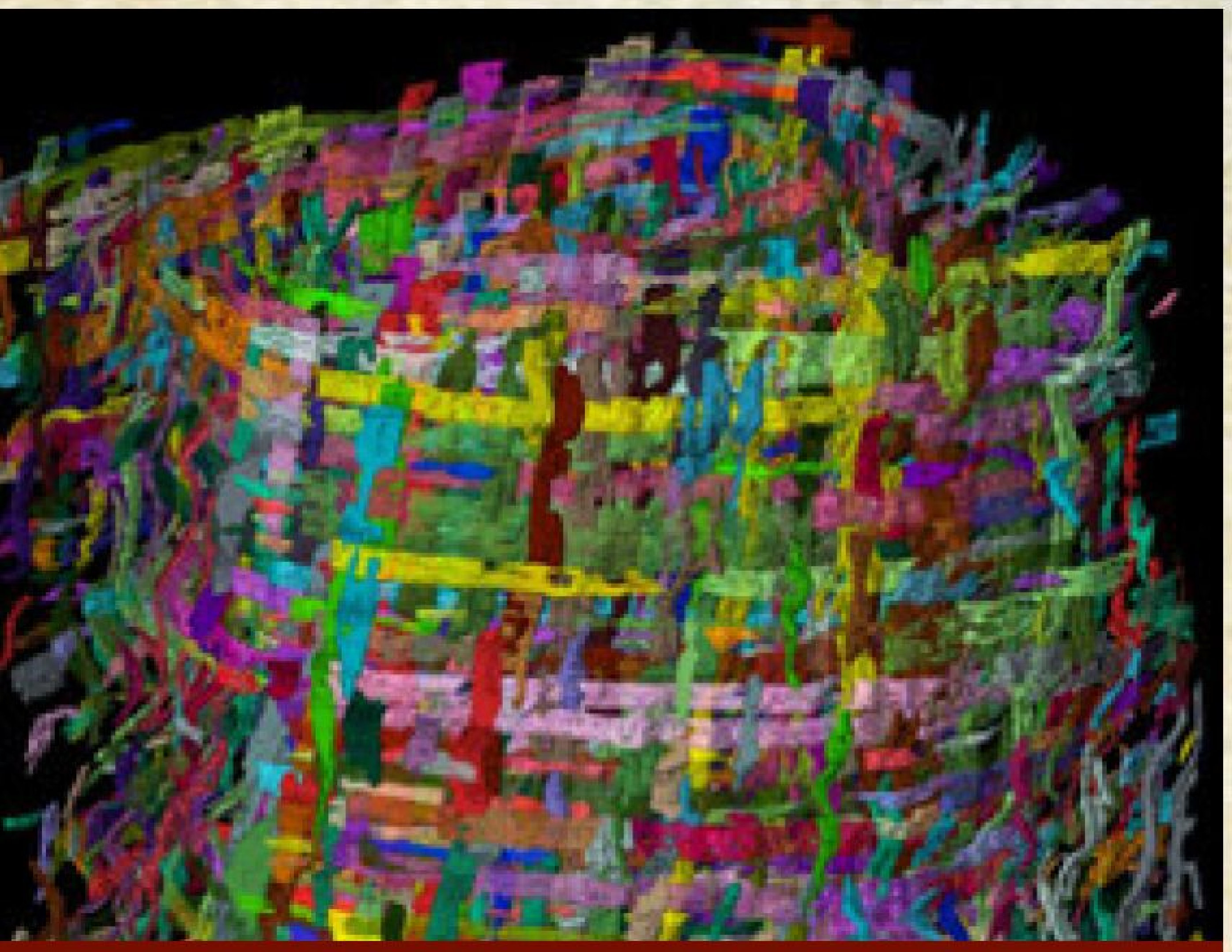
Q: When will the winners of the 2024 competition be announced?

Stephen: We had multiple prize deadlines close on December 31, 2024, and are evaluating them now. We will make announcements very soon regarding the winners and next steps.



Individual plant fibers that make up a papyrus sheet. Courtesy of Vesuvius Challenge

Q: What has been the most unexpected or rewarding discovery made by participants this year?

Stephen: This year our team and community have focused on the “segmentation” problem—the intricate task of tracing the warped and crumpled papyrus sheets inside the scroll. This has largely been a manual process so far, which will not work for hundreds of scrolls, or even for one entire scroll. Some regions inside the scroll are just too difficult. We need better algorithms, both to recover text from those regions, and to automate the process for the complete library. Among other exciting steps forward, one contestant this year created a set of machine learning models that can follow parts of the papyrus sheet inside the scan. For example, one of the models identifies the individual plant fibers inside the scan that make up a papyrus sheet. In addition to being tremendously valuable to the research problem, this results in beautiful images! We also scanned a new scroll last year, and were very pleasantly surprised by what we found inside! For reasons we are working to better understand, the ink in this scroll appears more readily inside the CT scan than the ink in other Herculaneum scrolls. As a result, we were quickly able to recover some initial letters and words from inside the scroll! Usually this process of discovery takes more time to get started. Our team and community are now extending these results, and soon we are going to be able to recover a large quantity of text from this scroll!

Q: How has opening the challenge to the public achieved results that couldn’t have been accomplished in-house?

Stephen: Opening Vesuvius Challenge to the public has allowed us to amplify and accelerate this work in a way we never imagined. Reading the Herculaneum scrolls is a large research problem, with multiple subproblems that each need solving. Doing this with a traditional research team, which we did for many years, was making progress, but at nowhere near the pace we can now achieve when the diverse perspectives of a worldwide community are brought to bear on the challenge. Many of the community members have made contributions across all parts of the software pipeline, while others have specialized, becoming experts in ink detection or segmentation and multiplying our pool of talented researchers to attack this problem.

Opening Vesuvius Challenge to the public has allowed us to amplify and accelerate this work in a way we never imagined. make this pretty easy.

One of the recently scanned scrolls. Courtesy of Vesuvius Challenge

Q: What are your thoughts on the role of citizen science in advancing projects like the Vesuvius Challenge?

Courtesy of Vesuvius Challenge

Stephen: Reading the Herculaneum scrolls is a challenge that we say has a large surface area—there are many steps to the virtual unwrapping pipeline, and improvements to any of them increase our ability to recover these texts from the ancient world. Citizen science is critical for blanketing that large surface area with a diverse set of contributors from different technical backgrounds—they are able to help us refine many pieces of the puzzle, all at once. One of the most successful choices we made when designing Vesuvius Challenge was to require all participants to open source (share publicly) their methods and results in order to claim prizes. The outcome has been that the rising tide lifts all boats: when one contributor makes a breakthrough, it is then made available to everyone! With a community as large and talented as the one we are fortunate to have, this results in a great pace of progress. It takes many people to make this work happen: our team, partners, and community all play an important role.

Q: Why do you believe the Vesuvius Challenge is so important for both science and history?

Stephen: Historically, we can't wait to discover and reveal the texts from this lost ancient library. We know much of the library contains works of Greek philosophy that are not otherwise known, so we can expect to discover more of them. New, unknown works of ancient philosophy like this are incredibly rare, especially discovered in place, as they were in ancient times, not being edited many times over before they survived to modernity. These works offer a unique view into life in the ancient world that we cannot otherwise access. On top of Greek philosophy, we also know that a portion of the library contains other texts, for example works in Latin, or works of poetry. There is a hugely wide window of possibility for what else we could discover, and all of it would be valuable to the scholars who work to understand this time period.

Scientifically, we want to show that great challenges can be overcome when they are pursued with dedication and with the right minds. We want to show that images and data often contain more than we give them credit for. With the right analysis, these X-ray images are yielding much more than they were originally thought to capture. And we believe the methods developed for this problem will have applications in other fields, for example medicine and connectomics. One of our community members has recently been in the news for using a CT scanner to look inside sealed packs of Pokemon cards!

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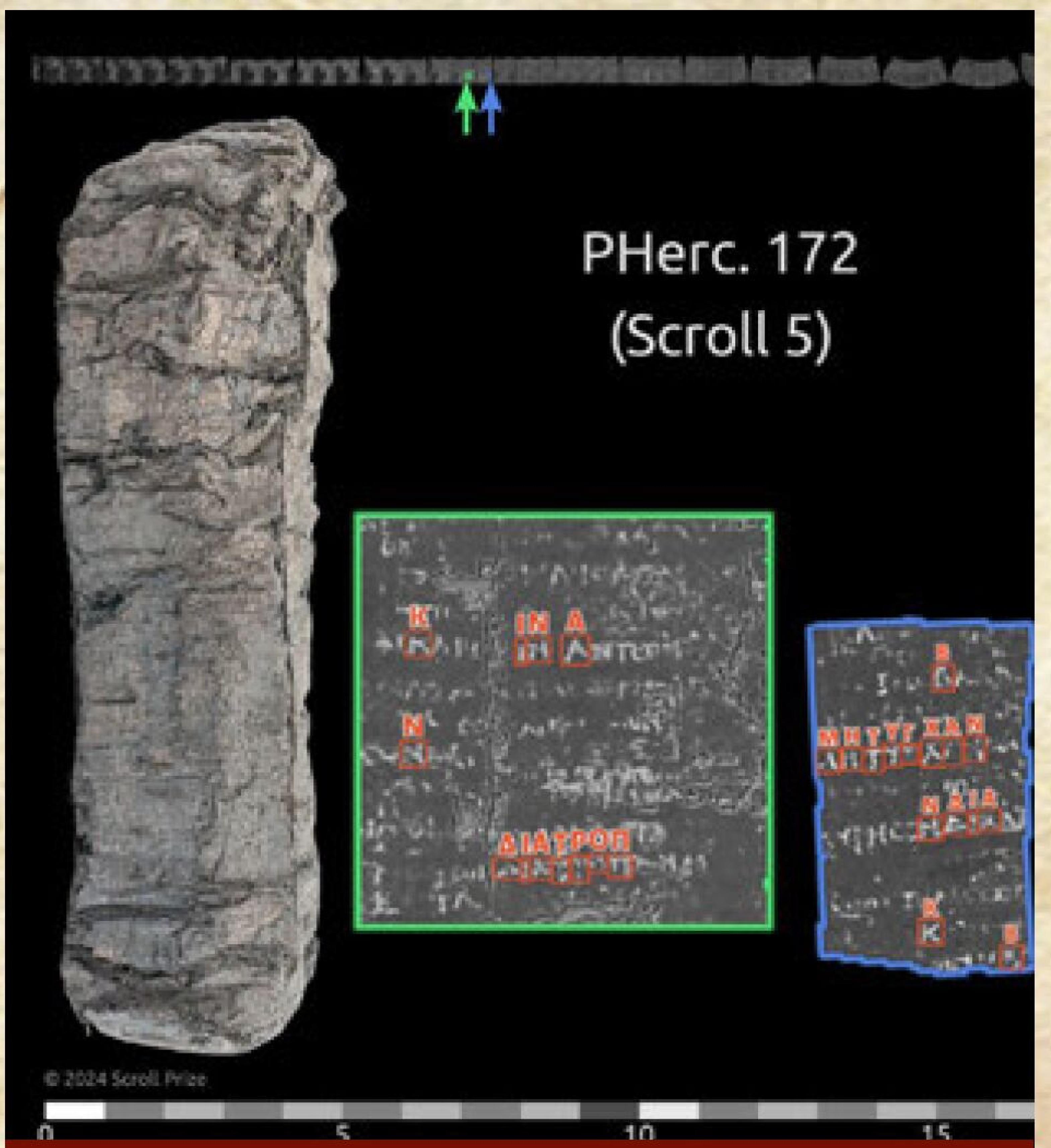
Q: Coming from a non-historical background, what has this project taught you about the ancient world?

Stephen: It is humbling to have access to such a direct link to the past and to observe just how much we have in common with the ancients. Walking the streets of Herculaneum and Pompeii reveals how similar their physical infrastructure is to what we still build today, and how important art has always been. Reading the text contained in the scrolls makes it clear that, on top of those practical concerns, people have long been facing the same philosophical problems as well: how does one live a happy and fulfilled life? And despite these lofty questions, we also get a front row seat to the way people have always been shady. The Stoics and Epicureans (and in particular Philodemus, a well-represented author in Herculaneum) love to sling insults at each other. The more things change, the more they stay the same!



Courtesy of Vesuvius Challenge

Q: What emotions do you feel when text buried for 2,000 years is brought to light?

Stephen: I feel like I'm reaching out and touching the hand of a scribe who lived 2,000 years ago, with a life I will largely never know about. The first time I recovered some text from a piece of one of these scrolls, it was only two characters—not enough to read anything, or know what the text was about. It didn't matter. While looking at that image on my screen, sitting on my couch watching *The Bachelor*, I was connected across an ocean and two millennia to another person. I like to wonder what they would make of this, and the effort we are putting into recovering their writings. They never could have imagined.

Q: What new insights about the ancient world have the scrolls revealed so far, and what more do you hope to discover?

Stephen: We've so far started to reveal some previously unknown ancient works of philosophy, and I hope for more of that! It would also be fun to recover original copies of works we already know about, but only have edited versions of: scholars can learn tremendously in this case about how the text has been changed and edited over the centuries. Some new poetry would also be fun!

Q: What lessons from the Vesuvius Challenge could be applied to other fields of historical research, particularly those dealing with lost or inaccessible knowledge?

Stephen: When we are fortunate enough to witness the convergence of technological development with the needs of historical research, we can start to uncover knowledge that was previously assumed lost. And many of the tools we can use to do so never would have been imaginable to the people who worked in this field in the past. Don't give up hope! ■

To find out more about this fascinating work, visit the Vesuvius Challenge website at WWW.SCROLLPRIZE.ORG

Makloubeh:

The Upside-Down Dish That Brings People Together

From his home in the heart of Bethlehem, chef Fadi Kattan has devoted much of his life to honoring the evocative tastes and aromas of his heritage. His new cookbook, *Bethlehem: A Celebration of Palestinian Food*, takes readers on a journey through the region's vibrant culinary traditions. But this is not his first endeavor to highlight the distinctive flavors and cultural richness of his homeland. From hosting the podcast *Ramblings of a Chef* to his YouTube series *Teta's Kitchen*, where he showcased the culinary wisdom of grandmothers from his community, Kattan has emerged as a leading voice in celebrating the depth and diversity of Palestinian gastronomy. Featured by CNN's Christiane Amanpour and on Jamie Oliver's vegetarian cooking series *Jamie's Ultimate Veg*, Kattan now runs two acclaimed restaurants: Akub, named after a wild thistle historically foraged in the region, in London; and Louf, inspired by the indigenous plant *Arum palaestinum*, in Toronto. Still, he dreams of one day reopening Fawda in Bethlehem, the beloved restaurant he was forced to close during the pandemic.

Fadi Kattan. Courtesy of Fadi Kattan

Kattan's deep appreciation for the local flavors, terroir, artisans, and hospitality that define the region's cuisine comes through vividly in *Bethlehem*. Stories from his personal family history blend seamlessly with anecdotes about local characters and suppliers, painting a rich portrait of a culinary landscape deeply rooted in the land and its layered history. Through his narrative, readers come to appreciate the fragility and singular importance of olive oil pressed from Roman-era olive trees in the Iron Age village of Sebastia, the foraged herbs of Artas brought to the souk in Bethlehem's Old City by Um Nabil, or the fragrant blends crafted by his local spice master. Memories of his

family's Jaffa orange groves combine with the unique taste of eggplants from Battir, while we learn to appreciate the millennial practice of harvesting salt from the Dead Sea, and the Bedouin tradition of salted, sun-dried *labanjamid* yogurt.

In one of the most poignant sections of *Bethlehem*, Kattan reflects on a time when the city thrived as a place of harmony among cultures and religions, before the upheaval of the 1948 Nakba and the ensuing occupation. "I wish that everyone who celebrates Christmas, whether as a secular or religious feast, remembers that it actually started here," he emphasized during a video call from Bethlehem. "It didn't start in your toy shop down the street; it didn't start in Rome. It started in Palestine. It started in Bethlehem. And maybe, while people are celebrating, they can reflect on the essential message from Bethlehem: a message of solidarity."

Historically, Palestinian cuisine stands as a true crossroads of historic trade routes and cultures. "Palestine is defined by three distinct terroirs: the desert, the inland, and the coast. Each of these regions has its own unique food habits, recipes, and flavors," explained Kattan. "If we put aside the pseudo-political, religious, and ethno-centric narratives being presented to the world today, this land was not only the Israelites', not only the Canaanites', not only the Philistines', not only the Nabateans', and not only the Natufians'; it was, in fact, all of theirs." Add to this the role of vital ports like *Caesarea Maritima*, near modern-day Haifa, and *Maiuma*, by Gaza—both crucial during the Roman Empire—and the subsequent importance of religious sites like Bethlehem to multiple faiths, and one begins to see why the region's culinary traditions draw from so many influences, blending ingredients from across the world into a singular, distinctive food culture.

Among the more than 60 recipes in Kattan's book, *makloubeh* stands out with a history believed to date back to the Middle Ages. Now considered a national dish, it has come to symbolize cultural resilience and embodies the spirit of hospitality and generosity central to Palestinian culture. Makloubeh is an abundant

Cauliflower Makloubeh. Courtesy of Fadi Kattan

Makloubeh:

The Upside-Down Dish That Brings People Together

Um Nabil, a native of Artas, selling herbs at the souk in Bethlehem's Old City. Courtesy of Fadi Kattan

communal dish, a comfort food of sorts, traditionally served at family gatherings and celebrations. The pot is theatrically flipped over with great flourish, revealing the dish upside-down on a tray as the centerpiece of the meal.

Alongside recipes, *Bethlehem* is an intimate portrait of Kattan, his family history, and his love of Palestinian cuisine. Courtesy of Fadi Kattan

There are different versions of how it got its name. "I prefer the story of a visiting dignitary—Saladin, the former Sultan of Egypt—who, not knowing the dish's name, simply described it instead," clarified Kattan. "That's because makloubeh means 'what's flipped over.' We have a lot of names of dishes that reflect the way they're done or the way they're presented."

"For me, a proper makloubeh is made with just one vegetable and one type of meat. I'm very formatted by my mother's cooking, where tradition dictates that if you use aubergine [eggplant], you use lamb, and if you do a cauliflower makloubeh, you put chicken with it." The recipe is rooted in local ingredients and seasonal vegetables, an aspect of profound importance to Kattan. "By reading *Bethlehem*, I hope readers will come away with questions—questions that challenge their own assumptions about us. As for cooking, I want everybody to use both their emotions and their brain when they cook. So, if the makloubeh recipe in the book uses cauliflower, don't use a frozen cauliflower in the middle of summer. Instead, visit your local farmers' market, find whatever vegetables are in season, and use an alternative." ■

Cauliflower Makloubeh

Ingredients (serves 6 to 8)

For the chicken:
- 2 teaspoons ground allspice
- 1 teaspoon ground turmeric
- 1 teaspoon ground coriander
- 1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 2 teaspoons salt
- 1 teaspoon ground black pepper
- 1 whole chicken, about 4 pounds
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 onion, halved
- 2 bay leaves

For the cauliflower:
- 1 1/4 cups vegetable oil
- 1 large cauliflower, cut into florets

For the rice:
- 4 cups basmati rice
- 1 teaspoon ground allspice
- 1/2 teaspoon ground coriander
- 1/4 teaspoon ground turmeric
- 1/4 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 2 tomatoes, sliced
- 2 onions, sliced
- Water, as needed

For the garnish (optional)
- 2 tablespoons whole almonds
- 2 tablespoons pine nuts

Academy of Taste

By Cecilia Bogaard

Kattan making *musakhan* with the restaurant owner Abu Mohammad in Sebastia. Courtesy of Fadi Kattan

Method

To prepare the chicken, combine the allspice, turmeric, coriander, cinnamon, salt, and pepper. Rub the mix into the chicken. In a pot large enough to fit the whole chicken, heat the olive oil over medium high heat. Add the onion and sear. Add the chicken, water to cover, and the bay leaves. When the water comes to a boil, decrease the heat to medium-low and simmer for 45 to 60 minutes, until the chicken is cooked through.

To prepare the cauliflower, fill a deep-frying pan with the vegetable oil and heat it over medium-high heat to 350°F. Working in batches, fry the cauliflower florets until they're golden, 2 to 3 minutes. Remove them from the oil with a spider or slotted spoon and drain them on paper towels.

Remove the chicken from the broth. Strain the broth through a sieve into a bowl. Add salt and pepper to taste. Cut the chicken into eight pieces.

To prepare the rice, rinse the rice in cold water until the water runs clear. Drain, place in a bowl, and add the spices to it, mixing well to coat the rice grains.

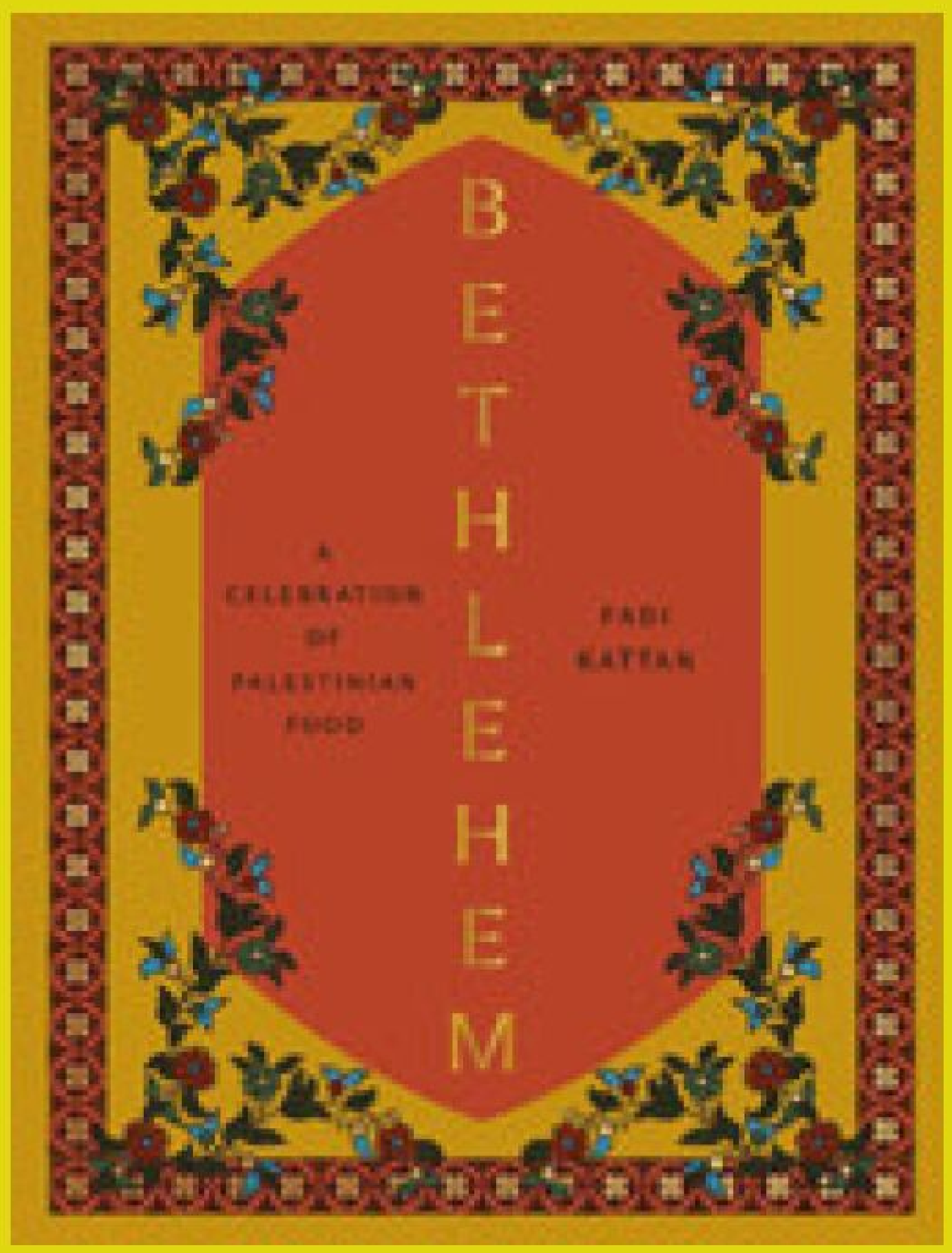
Pour the olive oil into a large pot. Layer the sliced tomatoes and onions in the bottom. Layer the chicken pieces on top with the skin-side down. Next add the fried cauliflower in a layer, then add the spiced rice. Pour in the strained broth until the rice is covered. If the broth does not cover the rice, add water and cover the pot.

Bring the broth to a boil, then decrease the heat to medium-low and simmer for about 45 minutes, until the rice is cooked. Turn off the heat and allow the steam to finish the cooking, about 10 minutes.

Meanwhile, to prepare the garnish if using, toast the almonds in a frying pan over medium heat for about 3 minutes. Add the pine nuts and toast for another minute, stirring. Do not allow the nuts to burn.

To serve, remove the pot lid. Cover the pot with a large serving tray and flip it upside down. Tap the bottom of the pot with your hands and leave it to sit for 5 minutes to make sure that the makloubeh has slipped off the pot onto the tray. Lift the pot; you should have a perfectly round makloubeh. If garnishing, sprinkle the toasted almonds and pine nuts on top before serving.

SAHTEIN!



BETHLEHEM

A CELEBRATION OF PALESTINIAN FOOD

FADI KATTAN

This recipe was excerpted with permission from *Bethlehem: A Celebration of Palestinian Food* by Fadi Kattan, published by Hardie Grant Publishing. For more delicious recipes like this one, order your copy on Amazon today!

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RISE AND FALL OF CIVILIZAT

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